



General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar

The Challenge to Peace in
the Twenty-First Century

SAW EH HTOO
TONY WATERS

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“This book is an insightful and thoughtful exploration of Ne Win’s vision and legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar. The author offers a deep understanding of Myanmar’s complex history and the challenges to peace it faces in the 21st century. Carefully unpacking Ne Win’s strategies, the author illuminates the country’s past by weaving in personal narratives.

Saw Eh Htoo was a dear friend. We shared countless coffee-fueled conversations, discussing ideas and his passionate hopes for a united, peaceful Myanmar. I deeply miss my friend and his vision for his homeland.”

—Dr. Charlotte Hill, *Lecturer, Chiangmai University*

“An important and original contribution to scholarship on - and from - Burma. Prof Tony Waters has done a wonderful job curating Thra Eh Htoo’s insightful analysis of Burmanization in Myanmar. First-hand accounts from Eh Htoo’s personal experience contribute to a deep and rich treatment of the subject. The book is particularly valuable for its use of primary sources. It should be essential reading for those seeking to understand the country – particularly, as Eh Htoo notes, the army of foreign aid organisations which so often take government announcements and policies at face value, without realising the underlying structural and cultural violence at the heart of Myanmar.”

—Dr. Ashley South, *Author and Independent Consultant, Chiangmai*

“I have had the opportunity of staying with Eh Htoo during our Ph.D. studies at Payap University for two and half years. Every time we sat down and talked together with Prof. Tony Waters, Eh Htoo always expressed his thoughts about how our country (Burma) was ruled and portrayed by the successive military governments. This book reflects personal and historical accounts, and his dream for the country’s future. I appreciate his love for the country and what he wanted to see in the future.”

—Hayso Thako, *President of the Institute of Higher Education for Karen Education and Cultural Development KECD, and Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE)*

“Eh Htoo’s writing evoked nostalgic memories of the time we spent together during our PhD journey. Both Eh Htoo and Hayso are my beloved Karen

brothers and I learned about the spirit of ‘imagined Kawthoolei national community’ from them. While reading his book, I hear his cry in the poem ‘Burmese Burden’ which he adapted from Kipling’s classic work, *The White Man’s Burden*.

‘Half devil and half child, take up the Burmese burden, In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror, And check the show of pride.’ Eh Htoo left us a spirit of peace as his legacy.”

—Dr. Mon Mon Myat, *Faculty, Department of Peace Studies, Payap University,
and Journalist*

Saw Eh Htoo · Tony Waters

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ISBN 978-981-97-1269-4 ISBN 978-981-97-1270-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-1270-0>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The bulk of this manuscript was prepared at the Institute for Religion, Culture, and Peace, Payap University, Chiangmai, Thailand. Besides (obviously) Saw Eh Htoo, the students in the first two cohorts (2016 and 2017) who contributed directly and indirectly include Qamaruz-zaman A., Eva Mazharenko, Saw Alwyn, Mon Mon Myat, Hayso Thako, Rob Otterman, and Matthias Rimarzik. Faculty included Dr. Somboon Panyakom, Dr. Mark Tamthai, Dr. Suchart Sethamalinee Dr. Le Ngoc Bich Ly, and Dr. Rey Ty. Others from Payap University who were involved with what became a very cohesive group include Phyu Phyu Thi, Moe Thida Lwin, William Phaiboon, and Dr. Min Htun. Dr. Ashley South and Dr. Charlie Hill were also frequently involved. All knew Saw Eh Htoo well.

Dr. Mon Mon Myat has been personally involved with the manuscript since its inception in many talks with Saw Eh Htoo both in Chiangmai, and later in Yangon where both experienced the COVID epidemic, and the February 1, 2021, coup.

While preparing the manuscript, a number of people helped me with fact-checking and encouragement. These include Dr. Mon Mon (again), Saw Eh Htoo's co-author Dr. Ardeth Thawngmunh, and Tyler Davis, all of whom knew Saw Eh Htoo well. In Hamburg, I was very pleased to meet Dr. Hans-Bernd Zöllner who was able to set me straight about a number of issues dealing with Myanmar history for which he has a great love. Mistakes of course are still my responsibility.

Saw Eh Htoo had a fellowship at Singapore National University in the Summer of 2018, which should also be acknowledged. He greatly appreciated the chance to visit a world-class library and interact with the scholars there. He related to me his appreciation for the mentorship of Dr. Maitri Aung-Thwin and others.

I wish I could write more about the contacts Eh Htoo made in Yangon. He was excited about having access to the documents and archives there and having people to assist him. This access though of course disappeared following the February 1, 2021, coup. Many of his contacts, formal and informal, came through the NGO world, church, and his days at Myanmar Institute of Theology, and Yangon University.

Much of Saw Eh Htoo's influences he experienced are described in Chapter 1. The most important connection in Yangon was with the Kaw Lah Foundation (Green Earth), which he founded, and which undertook consultancy contracts in Rakhine, Chin, Karen, and other states of Myanmar after about 2012.

I of course wish I could say that Saw Eh Htoo and I share the blame for the mistakes here. But alas, he passed away on May 31, 2022 in Yangon, so that cannot be. Final responsibility is only with me.

Lüneburg, Germany

Tony Waters
Professor of Sociology

NOTE ON AUTHORSHIP

This book began as a Ph.D. dissertation by Saw Eh Htoo in 2018. As his advisor, I worked with him closely as he developed his ideas about how General Ne Win's policies for Burmanization were implemented following the military coup of 1962. Eh Htoo's thesis was that Burmanization policies shape prospects for peace in Myanmar even during the days of NLD rule in 2016–2021, and after the military coup of February 1, 2021. Informally Eh Htoo called the authoritarian system of military-dominated government that has afflicted Myanmar “Ne Winism” after General Ne Win, the inventor of Burma's police state, which Saw Eh Htoo grew up in. He believed the consequences of the policies Ne Win introduced to the schools, military, popular culture, and governance persist today, and is the major barrier to peace. Eh Htoo called it Ne Winism in order to separate it from the other “-isms” like socialism, communism, capitalism, Buddhism, militarism, and federalism which seemingly dominate discussions initiated by Western donors for peace in Myanmar in the twenty-first century. Saw Eh Htoo believed that until the peace negotiators came to grips with the consequences of Ne Winism, the type of nation-state all Burmese desired was probably not possible.

I learned about Saw Eh Htoo's views through his writing, and especially during many hours in seminars, and in coffee shops in Chiangmai, and Yangon. After the February 1, 2021 coup, I talked with him via internet connections between his home in Yangon, and mine in Thailand and California. In the time after the coup, he was often on the

move, concerned that he was on a “black list” for arrest due to this long involvement with international NGOs, contacts with embassies, and studies in Thailand and Singapore. He eventually concluded that it was safe to return to his home in Yangon, but there he contracted a serious case of COVID in October 2021, and then was diagnosed with cancer for which chemo-therapy was prescribed, and eventually administered in two rounds. He passed away during the second round on May 31, 2022.

As his academic advisor, I kept in contact with Saw Eh Htoo frequently following the coup. He was set up on Signal by February 11, 2011, which is how we communicated. On February 15, 2021, he texted, “Last night was very strange...The night was very quiet...And the soldiers were everywhere....and the drones were flying everywhere...” which he calls “PsyWar.” The messages over the next 1.5 years are about military activity in Yangon, his movements out of Yangon, his dissertation, attendance at conferences, and Yangon as a “failed city.” On March 3, 2021, he wrote “I’m working on (my paper) for the conference...YG is a failed city....The military men tried to kill everyone against them. We have to protect ourselves...They have guns....We don’t.”

There was also progress on his dissertation, and his planning to attend a conference via Zoom, at Chiangmai University. Later there would be health concerns. In July 2021, COVID. In January 2022, he began chemo-therapy. In January, there was also congratulations for his book chapter about Burmanization which was printed in Germany, and then in February a case of COVID again.

And so, it went until the last message on May 2, 2022. I received word from his fellow student Hayso Thako, that he passed away on May 31, 2022. Following that I contacted his wife in Yangon to express condolences at the great loss. She also agreed that I could go ahead with this book, and fairly quickly we had a contract from Palgrave Macmillan.

Here I would like to note what I changed/adjusted/edited.

First, getting the book ready for publication has meant changing the dissertation format, with its formal emphasis on separating the Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Analysis, etc., and putting it into a form as narrative social history. I added paragraphs elaborating on the history of Burma, and the sociology of peace, protest, and war in Myanmar. In other words, there is now an introduction, narrative chapters, a sociological analysis, and a conclusion. But each chapter is still the personal reflections of Saw Eh Htoo, a writer who lived in “the belly of the beast,” which was Ne Win’s Burma. I believe that much of the power

of this book comes from Eh Htoo's first hand lived (emic) observations. In reorganizing the book, I have worked hard to make his perspective legible to people like me who never lived in Burma during Ne Win's rule, or after. For this reason, all references to the first person singular are usually to Saw Eh Htoo. In other places, I have put his name in the third person, even though again, the overall structure of the argument is his. This approach makes the book richer and more readable, than if I were to substitute "we" as a formal co-author. So where the use of the first person is not clear, I have entered Eh Htoo's name in the third person. I do this in the interest of clarity, not to take away credit from Eh Htoo for what is written here. This work still very clearly Eh Htoo's thesis, and he needs to receive credit for not only the thesis, but also emic nature of the book.

Much of the text is rooted in Saw Eh Htoo's understanding of Burmese and Karen language material about Burmanization. Some of this was published, and much of which was orally transmitted and is part of Eh Htoo's emic sense for the subject. I do not read or write any Burmese languages, and cannot verify Eh Htoo's translations and interpretation, though as part of the editorial preparation I have occasionally checked with students and colleagues who are familiar with the Burmese language to see that it "makes sense." Besides the personal anecdotes (particularly in Chapter 1), the book is immeasurably enriched by Saw Eh Htoo's inclusion of citations and quotations from the generals who organized Burmanization policies beginning in the 1960s. In recent years a number of Ne Win's lieutenants have written their memoirs. Much was published in Burmese between about 2005 and 2020. Saw Eh Htoo disliked the Burmanization policies intensely. However, his reference to the memoirs of the men who implemented Ne Win's vision increases the value of this book a great deal.

As a co-author/editor, I added the historical context necessary for an international readership. Saw Eh Htoo himself wrote often with an educated Myanmar academic audience in mind, and assumed a certain level of historical and social knowledge about Myanmar, as emic writers often do. So besides re-ordering the text to fit a social narrative format, I have added where appropriate background historical material, including footnotes.

A reviewer of the manuscript asked what was Eh Htoo, and what is Tony? This is a fair question, but one which is not easily answered. At times I am an editor, at other times I added paragraphs of relevant text,

particularly in Chapters 2–8. Chapter 1 is clearly Eh Htoo’s personal story, but I also edited it heavily several times, as a Ph.D. advisor often does.

In single-authored works, I always recommend using first person pronouns when appropriate. In this work, I have compromised a bit. At several points in Chapters 2–8, reference is made back to Eh Htoo’s auto-biography in Chapter 1. In these cases, Eh Htoo speaks as the third person. I think this makes the book more readable—but it should also be kept in mind that Eh Htoo is a major intellectual contributor and developer to Chapters 2–8 as well. In the end, this is very much a co-authored work since many of the words are indeed mine. But also, Eh Htoo is clearly the senior author, since it is his writing, thoughts, reading, and reasoning, which structure the argument and conclusions.

The real tragedy of Saw Eh Htoo’s passing is that Myanmar lost a man who truly sought peace. He was highly critical of the military cruelties and “Ne Winism,” but had a love for his own country, and the Karen and Burmese languages both of which he mastered at high levels. He was also developing a vision for a country that is inclusive of the many cultures of Myanmar, and his vision is found in the concluding chapters of this book. As he wrote in his autobiographical preface, he appreciates a great deal of the beauty and playfulness of the Burmese Buddhist culture, while remaining a proud Karen Christian. He believed the two identities were reconcilable, as indeed they were often in his own personality. To symbolize this desire on the dashboard of his car in Yangon were the crossed flags of Myanmar, and the Karen State of Kawthoolei.

Saw Eh Htoo was an accomplished historian and sociologist seeking to design social structures to facilitate peace in Burma/Myanmar. He already did this in his work as an NGO worker where he moved between elements of Myanmar society including his own Karen Baptist world, the Rohingya villages in Rakhine where he worked for several years, and the semi-independent Karen State of Kawthoolei. But mostly he was a Karen man of Yangon. His friends from his student days included officers in the Burmese military, Christian pastors, and in association with the INGO workers in Yangon. In Chiangmai where I got to know him well, he was an engaged and engaging Ph.D. student, well-liked by all for his conversation, good cheer, and generous spirit.

This book is a story about why Burmese history is important. But the context of Eh Htoo’s personal story are also important. Burma’s

tragic history starts with British colonialism as seen by his grandfather and continues to what he witnessed as a schoolboy, an anthropology student at Yangon University, as an NGO worker among the Rohingya, Karen, and others, and finally, as a Ph.D. student where I met him.

Despite all his personal interest in history (and action novels!), he tells a cautionary tale about the nature of education, and indoctrination. School is important, but it also can sow the seeds of catastrophe, like that which were the Burmanization policies that emerged out of Ne Win's Directorate of Psychological Operations in the 1950s, and the Ministry of Education after his 1962 coup.

Saw Eh Htoo had so many ideas about Myanmar's future, and what he would write about! I used to tease him that he was sketching out a 25-year-long academic career and reminded him his dissertation as a first step on that journey. Sadly for Myanmar, this book is the last step he took. But by bringing Saw Eh Htoo's dissertation to publication state, I hope that it will assist future Karen and Burmese scholars to continue seeking the national peace he sought.

Tony Waters

NOTE ON NAMES, REFERENCE, AND CITATIONS STYLES

The people of Myanmar do not have family names and often have only a single name. For example, my co-author Saw Eh Htoo has a single name “Eh Htoo.” “Saw” is an honorific for adult Karen males. Other ethnic groups use other honorifics, and the use of titles is very common. In English, he would be known simply as “Mr. Eh Htoo.” Another example is the first President of independent Burma had the personal name the mono-syllaboe “Nu,” but at different times in his life used the honorific “Thakin Nu” and later after entering politics “U Nu.” The use of names in this book reflects these practices. Personal preferences for particular names, and honorifics used by Burmese writers, political figures, and cultural figures are used here.

A number of Burmese names are also very common, especially that of Maung Maung, which is the name of no fewer than four people cited in this book. Various modifications are used to distinguish them. Thus, there is Maung Maung Gyi, Maung Maung Soe, Maung Maung (Dr.), and Maung Maung (Brigadier General).

Further complicating matters is the fact that across the life course, Burmese can use different names. Particularly the soldiers of the Burmese Independence Army might have a birth name, and then a military name. People with a Chinese background often have a Burmese, and Chinese name. A few also have English names. Myanmar/Burmese people living

along the Thai-Burma border often use different names on their passports, another one for professional purposes, and a third ethnic name in the family.

Writers working in English with Burmese source names always have difficulty knowing how to best alphabetize given the conventions of English. There is no perfect way—we just do the best we can. The references and notes following each chapter reflect this problem. I mentioned above that Saw Eh Htoo wrote from an insider emic perspective. The problem of alphabetization of the Burmese language in English reference sections is an outsider etic problem. We do the best we can.

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Introduction: Why Burmanization Is Important

The following two introductory chapters are about why the process of “Burmanization” was important to Saw Eh Htoo. The first chapter is his personal memories of life growing up in Ne Win’s Myanmar. It is a personal “coming of age” account that recounts his enthusiasm for football, action novels, the Burmese language, his discrimination fears, and an authoritarian education system.

The second chapter is an academic statement about how and why the subject to Burmanization became important for Myanmar today. Introduced is the historical background, and then there is a description of what this means for future policies.

Saw Eh Htoo framed this chapter with its cynical rewrite of Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” a paean written in 1899 when the British colonial powers were urging the Americans to take on the “burden” of ruling the Philippines. Saw Eh Htoo saw in the Burmese military similar attitudes.

The sum of these two views explains why understanding Burmanization is important for understanding why the internationally sponsored experiment in democratic rule in Burma (2012–2021) failed, and why and how the thoroughly Burmanized army and population clung to power after the February 1, 2021 military coup in Myanmar.



Eh Htoo's Auto-biography

1.1 MY INTRODUCTIONS TO BURMESE HISTORY: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

I grew up in the Yangon River Delta under the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) of General Ne Win, and became politically aware during the military's State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) regime in the 1990s. As an adult I lived in a Burma ruled by first the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) until 2010, and then the Semi-Military Government after 2011. This government of course ended with another military coup on February 1, 2021.

My daily living taught me about these institutions and Burma's history. But in retrospect, my Karen grandfather who was a farmer, had an important impact on how I interpreted what I saw and experienced. He was the one who first told me stories of British Burma, World War II in Burma, and the ongoing Karen-Burmese fighting. When I lived on my family's rice farm in the Irrawaddy Delta, both my grandfather and father told me stories in the Karen language, and from a Karen perspective. The Karen in this narrative were the victims of decades and centuries of Burmese oppression, and the Burmese were to be feared. The only protectors in these stories were the British, who subdued the Burmese in the nineteenth century, defeated the Japanese in 1945, and relinquished colonial power in 1947. The war between the Burmese government, and our Karen minority began in 1949 and lasted until a ceasefire in 1952, and then

only seemingly resumed later. In the process, the Karen villages, school systems, churches, and other institutions established with the protection of the British were nationalized, and Karen staff were replaced by Burmese sent from the capital in Rangoon.

And then at school, I heard another version of history from the teachers sent by the government's Burmese Socialist People's Party (BSPP) organized by General Ne Win, and after 1988 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The teachers blamed my grandfather's Karen people for the nation's troubles and contended that they were stooges of the British. The British and the Karen allies in this story were ongoing threats to the unity of a great nation that was Burma. They would teach me Ne Win's "*Burmanized*" version of history, and their teaching was reinforced in the available radio, films, books, and newspapers. I just did not understand that at the time. But more importantly, I saw my family struggle. We were thrifty. That struggle still encourages me to preserve money for tomorrow, because tomorrow is not certain.

So, I met Burma's political regimes at various ages. BSPP ruled my first twelve years until 1988 when the SLORC military took over. I don't remember much personally about the BSPP, but I remember how we lived. In my childhood, I was unaware of any political theory, and I took for granted everything I learnt in school, the instructors' explanations of Burmese history, the advantages of the Burmese language, and why it was important that only the military could guarantee the security of the nation. Still, I had never really heard the Burmese language before going to government schools, starting when I was about eight years old.

We moved about the Irrawaddy Delta until landing in Insein township outside Yangon, where the majority of the population was also Karen. By 1988, I lived in Yangon with my father, a taxi driver. I was in middle school in Yangon in 1988, and saw the revolt against Ne Win's government by what is now called the "1988 generation." A million or more people were in the streets. I was too young to participate, and my guardian father did not want me to be involved. Still for a few days, I moved with the crowd. I heard weapons firing and people fleeing into the streets. There were looters everywhere. At the time of the rebellion, Ne Win resigned, and his BSPP ceded power to SLORC. Since school was closed, we enjoyed our youth in the playground. I admired Aung San Suu Kyi, and the phrase "Democracy" entered my vocabulary, but I didn't fully grasp it.

After the SLORC consolidated political power, school finally reopened in 1990. Television also entered our lives, with the SLORC's military propaganda films dominating. Everyone seemed to appreciate the shows. In such movies, armed groups like the Karen National Union and the Burmese Communist Party were shown as foes who harmed the state and caused poverty. Some of my friends assumed I was a rebel (or even a Karen rebel!) because of those propaganda films. I felt isolated from society because I was assumed to be a rebellious opponent of the regime. To me, rebel meant bad, and I wanted to be a good man.

General Than Shwe replaced General Saw Maung in 1992 as the head of SLORC. General Than Shwe in turn dismantled the SLORC in 1997, which then re-emerged in Burmese politics as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). This happened while I was drifting through high school. I actually had poor grades in school. I was not a very good student in school because I loved football more. My father had been a successful second-division footballer, and I adored him.

But even though I didn't do well in school, I enjoyed reading. My father bought monthly subscriptions to children's publications, cartoons, and newspapers to help me. He bought self-help books too. I enjoyed reading and was also attracted to action movies. Due to my family's low budget, we couldn't buy a TV, so we went to friends' houses with TV as I grew older.

Soon, I outgrew cartoons and children's magazines and began reading Burmese translations of Chinese martial arts novels from which I absorbed the Chinese Yin and Yang concept. As a result, such philosophical concepts were not that new when I studied Chinese philosophy later at the university. Such narratives were embedded in the cartoon books I read in the 1980s and 1990s. I sometimes read more than six novels every day! My Burmese reading fluency was superior to my Burmese friends.

My Burmese skills improved in part because I could not afford the extra fees for the books. The private library charged us daily for books borrowed. So, I borrowed a book series of eight to twelve novels at a time. I was terrified that if I simply borrowed the first one or two volumes, someone else would borrow volumes three, four, or five. It also bothered me if I couldn't finish the series in the order they were published.

As I grew older, I read romance and science fiction, but I still really favored action novels. And so after three or four years, the little library ran out of Chinese martial arts and romance books for me to read. My life also took a turn when I became interested in politics, a risky subject

for SPDC-era Myanmar. I knew about this because my father and a few elders in our quarter surreptitiously listened to the BBC. Listening to the BBC or VOA was a crime under the military regime. You could be turned in by a police spy and sent to prison for listening to anything except what the SPDC approved.

I also listened raptly to the seniors' conversations at night. They discussed every action of the military government. I came to believe that that was every mature man's daily discourse. Interest in politics was intense, but always surreptitious. The elders warned us not to confront military personnel directly, sharing their military phobia with us all. We talked about the military leaders in hushed tones. We all knew or knew of folks who were arrested late at night and sent to prison. As for those who were released, they returned transformed, outcasts unable to rejoin society. I learnt also how the SPDC referred to my people, the Karen, as bad people, dangerous to the unity of the nation. In that context, I started remembering my grandfather's stories of life in British, Japanese, and independent Burma. That's also when I became a Baptist Christian, and I began to understand God's word.

So, after I finished the action literature and action movies, I started reading theological works, mainly from a Baptist perspective. My early Christian life was evangelical, and I wanted to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. My theological studies led me to philosophy, and so I applied for a philosophy undergraduate degree at Yangon University. But Burma's philosophy major was regarded as a flop, so most of my relatives disapproved of my choice of major. They thought I should major in accounting, medicine, or engineering, but, I wasn't qualified to do so because of my low grades.

Regardless, I liked my Philosophy classes. It was at college that I learned to appreciate philosophy. To pass a test at university, we had to memorize everything, but this was not enough for me. In the late 1990s, I traveled to Yangon's Pansodon Book Street to find old philosophy books. That's also when I started reading philosophy literature in Burmese since I couldn't understand English yet. The Burmese books were mostly about Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and the Burmese philosophy inherited from Buddhism, and the Burmese Kings. That's when I also learnt about Plato's politics, and I learnt more about democracy. In my quest for new philosophy books, I became obsessed. I also read translations of novels which were mostly Western classics published in Burmese during the 1950s.

Regarding Burmese society, I also of course read Ne Win's socialist writings which were widely available. In these publications, he did not emphasize democracy but described the importance of military discipline, and a Buddhist-based political philosophy. Westerners believed his ideas were illogical, and they may be so. But it all made sense to me because it reflected over thirty years of policy, practice, and habits of thinking I learned in elementary, secondary school, and at the university.

I also started learning English at the university. I did this in order to read philosophical literature written in English. I also enjoyed reading Moscow-published socialist novels which were widely available. The English translations were clear and concise, so some of my English education was based on Communist ideology! Until I went to the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) to study Christian theology, the Soviet works were a great source of philosophical understanding.

In 2006, I began my theological studies despite my family's financial struggles. Even though I intended to study full-time, I couldn't join the day class. So I enrolled at the Myanmar Institute of Theology's (MIT) evening and weekend classes, while teaching physical education at the international school during the week. I was irritated that MIT did not help weekend students. Perhaps because I am continuously rebelling against authoritarianism, I grew to regard some professors as "fascists"¹ in the sense the word was then understood in Burma, even though they claimed to be God's servants.

Still, seminary study was a life-changing experience. They showed me the path to emancipation that I wanted all my life. I started to embrace justice and reject injustice. During my seminary years in 2006–2008, I also went to distant mountain villages where Karen people lived in isolation from Yangon society. Many were Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs), and victims of Myanmar army attacks. Most had been village hopping since childhood. They lacked the education to confront the military government's evils. I chose to teach. I believed this was how I could train the next generation to rid our land of wickedness, and create the land known in Karen as Kawthoolei.

¹ "Fascist" is a word of many meanings in political discourse globally. In the sense Saw Eh Htoo uses it here, it is a relative to a Burmese understanding, in which the Japanese occupiers of Burma during World War II were fascists, which is why the political party that General Aung San established in 1945–1946 was called the "Anti-Fascists People's Freedom League."

After seminary, I also taught part-time at the Yangon Karen Baptist Bible School, Myanmar Institute of Theology (BARS/Liberal Arts Program), and Institute of Religious Education (Roman Catholic Church) all in Yangon. I knew I was doing the right thing, but my family still struggled financially. My faith in God led me to find work as a consultant after Myanmar's military government relaxed restrictions on international donors. This happened after the 2008 Constitution was ratified, and the 2010 elections held. At that time, I was hired by development and humanitarian programs. It was then I became an International Non-governmental Organization (INGO) consultant. My job transported me to impoverished areas. I learned about the Rohingya and their plight, and from 2009 to 2016, I worked at Sittwe Camp and the Maung Daw Limited Communities which are near Bangladesh, and India. I witnessed the Burmese military's policies and observed their desire to dominate the country. I learned how they still sought to defend their power and authority using military traditions drilled into them by General Ne Win and his successors. That's how I learned about Ne Win's enduring Burmanization policies, and was reminded of my grandfather's experience during the Burmese Civil War after 1949 when the Karen were attacked in the Irrawaddy River Delta, where there were long-established Karen villages and towns, with thriving school systems, churches, and Buddhist temples. These were established during the colonial era with the protection of the British.

1.2 MY GRANDFATHER AND ME

My grandfathers were both rice farmers. They lived and died on their own soil. My parents were both born in the Irrawaddy Delta and only met at their wedding. My paternal grandfather cultivated rice and lived in the colonial era before WWII, and later helped raise me. My grandfather was born about 1920. He lived through famine, forced displacement (before the UN formalized this term), and massacres. But he survived. My maternal grandfather was a talented and knowledgeable carpenter who died before I was born. My grandfathers both lived through the Karen-Burmese civil war of 1949–1952.

Both Karen grandfathers remembered British colonialism as pleasant. They saw the British as God's chosen guardians against the Burmese. Their fathers (my great-grandfathers) became Christians before my grandfathers were born. My father's grandfather was a Baptist, and my maternal

grandfather's family was traditionally Roman Catholic. But then my maternal grandfather married my grandmother, a devout Baptist Christian. Thus, they all became devout Baptists by the time my own parents were born, and never wavered.

My grandparents all had rough lives. They were poor, and World War II added to their agony. During the war, robbery and stealing soared. They didn't know what "wealthy" meant; the thought didn't enter their life. The story of their pain was told to me by the surviving grandfather when I was a boy in the Irrawaddy River Delta. These stories were filled with emotion, partiality, wrath, fear, and disobedience.

I grew up with my paternal grandfather and his bedtime stories. Karen myths, fairy tales, legends, and oral history were all incorporated. He also shared personal stories. My grandfather's bedtime stories shaped my childhood. The stories contained strong moral lessons about being a good Christian. He also taught me to be a Karen patriot who wanted to overthrow the Burmese rulers. My grandfather told me how the Burmese army stole their crops, tortured, killed, and raped the Karen after 1949. The Burmese soldiers did not spare him either, even though he was a poor farmer just trying to live his life, so he fled, too. He stated he didn't comprehend politics and couldn't fight back due to his lack of education. So, he valued knowledge and encouraged me to get educated so no one could oppress me, not even the Burmese (I still preferred football at the time!).

My grandfather instructed me to memorize the Bible Scriptures, which led to my conversion later. My granddad could read the Karen Bible but not write it because he spelled it incorrectly. He said he learnt to write in his thirties and never had formal education. But his stories and life philosophy inspired my boyhood. In my early years in the rural Irrawaddy Delta, he probably affected me more than my parents. My grandfather was a farmer and had vast farming experience. I've never farmed, but I know how to plough and grow paddy. I grew up tending to my family's cows and buffaloes (I was a genuine cowboy!). My boyhood cowboy pals were trustworthy. So, I know why farmers revolt.

In their life, farmers (and cowboys!) have feelings and experiences they never express to the world. But I wasn't a true farm lad. But I suppose I am a semi-rural/urban boy.

1.3 MY EDUCATION

Humans need company. We learn from our forefathers and our surroundings. My grandfather socialized me and taught me about my identity, which was distinct from my neighbors, especially those of Burmese descent. At home, I spoke Karen, which set me apart in the Irrawaddy River Delta. My mother tongue is Karen, and my Burmese was lacking at that time. My early education was likewise erratic. My parents, as far as I know, couldn't decide where I should go. My early youth was spent in a rural religious school, largely taught in Karen, so I couldn't always understand Burmese terms I heard elsewhere.

Friends advised me to have contact only with other Karen. When someone in our village spoke Burmese, they were called "*Payaw Poe*," which means "Burmese son" in the Karen language. So rural kids avoided their Burmese neighbors. Karens disliked Burmese in general. My earliest education was at a Christian Karen school, thus I consider my Karen roots as the deepest, even if I still enjoy Burmese language action stories! My father and grandfather realized the value of language in schooling.

The official language during Ne Win's time was Burmese, so to advance one needed to be conversant in the language. Most Karen and some ethnic groups were denied advancement due to poor Burmese communication abilities. The logic was twisted for us, Karen. Only Burmese was the language of higher education hence only Burmese could benefit from the post-secondary institutions.

I left the Karen church school where I first learned to read at the age of eight years old, and went to the government school. Burmese was utilized as the linguistic medium. My first day of grade two at the government school was awful. The lecture was in Burmese, which I couldn't understand. The children had to memorize everything, and I couldn't write a word. My teacher smacked me. This happened to four or five students. My teacher told my mum that I needed to take an extra class to catch up. I despised my school. Every day, I awoke saddened. Nonetheless, my Burmese improved, and in fourth grade, we all took the district exam. I aced my Burmese literary exam, probably because I enjoy storytelling in any language.

In 1988, while in middle school in Rangoon/Yangon, Ne Win's military administration was overthrown, and the schools closed. After the schools reopened, military officers would occasionally visit our school to explain their policies. The schoolmaster invited a few students. My class

teacher chose me to attend them because I was quiet and respectful. I learned about the military-dominated society the officers wanted us to join.

But I was not enthusiastic about going to school back then. I preferred football and wanted to represent my school in a tournament. In addition, our education system required us to memorize everything they told us. Every year I dreaded the examinations because those who failed the exam had to redo the class. So in class, I learned to pass my tests by knowing enough facts. I didn't protest either, even when some teachers abused the Karen, and abused me with obscene words. "You Karen are rebels, and you are too!" said one teacher. I didn't object because I couldn't. That event taught me to tolerate a racist educator. My grandfather had told me about the bravery of the Karen troops who fought alongside the British, and against the Japanese and their allies in the "Burmese Independence Army" during WWII.

Not every teacher was harsh. Others taught me that racism and bigotry did not come from the bloodline, but from the society we lived in. I made acquaintances with Karen pupils as well as Burmese. But my Burmese pals were mostly sons of street sellers, food stall owners, civil officers, and religious leaders. Nobody in their families was a doctor or military officer. Our group had a lot of feelings for each other. We were a *Gemeinschaft* community, as sociologist Max Weber defined it.

As my father was becoming elderly and couldn't drive the taxi anymore, I had to start commuting in order to support him and our family. I couldn't always attend classes in person, so I took part-time online education courses. Still, my father encouraged me to spend my family's limited funds on education. I finished my bachelor's degree in philosophy, and then my master's degree at the Myanmar Institute of Theology followed.

Later, under the oppressive military administration, I earned a Master of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Yangon. Taking anthropology helped me understand my country's ethnic tensions. My classmates at Yangon University were from the history, international relations, and geology departments. Many were military officers. The Anthropology Department had no military officers, but the Department was formed by General Khin Nyunt, who was the country's third biggest figure, director of military intelligence for many years, and briefly Prime Minister. The

generals wanted to use anthropology to rule the highlands. In this atmosphere, and with the emergence of a civilian administration, I resolved to be a peacemaker.

In 2012, I started following the Burmese peace movement and political transformation. My most rigorous work was with the Rohingya in Rakhine State before their 2017 expulsion. I also worked for the British UKAID, and other agencies in the Karen State highlands. My academic and informal education from the University of Yangon and MIT helped me understand the society I lived in.

1.4 WHY NE WIN AND BURMANIZATION?

Looking back on my own life and socialization in Myanmar, I know that Ne Win's policies in the 1960s paved the way for authoritarian military rule. But Ne Win's state is also narrowly based on the Burmese people, language, culture, and Buddhist religion and so is unsustainable in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation like Burma. But in this setting, Ne Win and his military fostered Burmanization thought tendencies (what Bourdieu called *habitus*) which put military discipline, Burmese culture, and Buddhist religion as the only center. Such tendencies still plague Burma today. The legacy of "Ne Winism" in Myanmar society must be understood to comprehend where and how a peaceful Burma will be created.

Some say that Ne Win did not create Burmanization and did not intend to Burmanize the entire country. They think Ne Win was originally a politician simply seeking political expediency and power, and that Burmanization was an afterthought. Based on my own experiences in Burmese society, I disagree. In fact, Ne Win did create the habits of thinking that the Myanmar peacebuilders face today. This is visible in the dominant Burmese-speaking people's behaviors as well as the ethnic minorities' habits of reverence, silence, and resistance.

I learned from my grandfather's stories, and my own reading that after the coup in 1962, Ne Win created a national vision rooted in Burmese-ness. Ne Win of course believed the stumbling block to unification was a lack of unity which could only be resolved by subordinating all other cultures to a single "Burmese" identity. Thus, ethnic people living in Burma were all subordinated to the dominant Burmese identity. Ne Win devised an ethnic model that re-defined Burmese and "the others" on his nationality lists with this vision of assimilation to a single identity

under the military in mind. Notably, the Rohingya were excluded from the nationality lists, as were Chinese and Indian immigrants.

Ne Win sought to make a purified Burmese nation that would be freed of what he believed was the foreign influence of Chinese, Indians, and British. He also wanted to assimilate the Karen and other highlanders into his vision of Burmese society. His Burmanization programs aimed to create a cohesive Burmese identity. But it was a poor method that certainly did not fit with the vision my grandfather realted to me in the Irrawaddy Delta, the Karen in the mountains I later met, or among the Rohingya in Rakhine among whom I later worked. Or for that matter the dozens of other ethnic groups who, like my Karen grandfather, feared the Burmese, and certainly did not love them.

Ne Win directed his supporters to create a Burmanized society, based on policies in his BSPP “Blue Book.” His professional historians/philosophers such as U Ko Ko Maing Gyi, U Chit Hlaing, and Dr. Maung Maung created a worldview to embrace an emotional Burmese nationalism. Ne Win’s policies were introduced to the country through the schools, universities, popular culture, and the military. This was the curriculum I was exposed to when I began Burmese schools at 8 years old and continued through my master’s degrees at MIT and Yangon University.

Ne Win also knew the military’s power because he was a soldier. He trusted only military might and distrusted Burmese civilians or ethnic minorities. So did his political advisors and the people he tasked with implementing these policies. The Burmese army, the *Tatmadaw* (which means “Royal Army” in English), was the focus of his unification agenda because he perceived its historical roots in what his philosophers and historians called the great Burmese Kingdoms.

Burmanization and militarization formed Ne Win’s political culture and it is still persistent today. Burma’s militarization was void of all democratic values. It was a structure that meant only other military generals could govern when Ne Win left politics, which is what happened in 1988. Even after 1988, the military continued to rely on Ne Win’s Burmanized masses for support and legitimacy. His successors just tweaked the policy to fit the new contexts. So did the new civilian NLD government of 2016–2021. And this is the world that shaped my own world view as a youth, and which I questioned as I thought through my grandfather’s stories, in my experiences with the highland Karen, the Rohingya,

and finally in my PhD studies at Payap University in Chiangmai since 2017. The Burmanization that my grandfather, father, and I experienced remains deeply embedded in the military's habits of governance and rule.

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CHAPTER 2

Why Ne Win's Burmanization Policies Are Still Important Sixty Years Later: The Burmese Burden

Taking Up the Burmese Burden by Saw Eh Htoo

Take up the Burmese burden- Send forth the best ye breed- Go send your sons to ethnic land To serve your ethnics need To wait in heavy harness On fluttered folk and wild- Your new-caught sullen peoples, Half devil and half child Take up the Burmese burden In patience to abide To veil the threat of terror And check the show of pride;	By open speech and simple And hundred times made plain To seek another's profit And work anther's gain Take up the Burmese's burden- And reap his old reward: The blame of these ye better The hate of those ye guard- The cry of hosts ye humor (As slowly) to the light: "Why brought ye us form bondage, Our beloved Burma night?"	Take up the Burmese burden- Have done with childish days- The lightly proffered laurel, The easy, ungrudged praise Come now, to search your manhood Through all the thankless years, Cold-edged with dearbought wisdom, The judgment of your peers!
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2.1 THE ORIGINS OF NE WIN'S BURMANIZATION PROGRAMS

Burma is known today for having the world's longest civil war. The conflict began weeks after independence on January 4, 1948, and continues today. But those conflicts actually began first during the days of British colonialism, and from 1942 to 1945 when Burma was a battle-field between The British and Japanese Empires in World War II. Indeed, there was really only one brief period of relative peace between the 1920s, and the coup that installed Ne Win as the military dictator in 1962, and that was between the end of the Burmese Civil War, and Ne Win's 1962 coup. Before and after, highland areas were in revolt, while the cities periodically exploded in mass demonstrations and revolt in response to with mass crackdowns, massacres, arrests, and terror.

General Ne Win who was dictator of Burma from 1962 to 1988 insisted that the problem was interference by outsiders whether from Britain, China, the United States, India, Pakistan, or elsewhere, and in their own ways, each of these countries gave him reason to be suspicious. His response after he seized control in 1962 was a regime that ruled through disciplined terror and fear. At that time, the military nationalized assets, expelled foreigners, closed off the country to foreign trade and even refused loans from the World Bank and IMF. Inside Burma, fears of Ne Win and his generals were felt most harshly via the rule of military officers. After 1962, what became known as Burmanization policies were implemented, in which assimilation to Burmese Buddhist identity was insisted upon, minority rights were eliminated, long-time foreign residents were expelled, and the economy was brought under centralized control by the army. Dissent was treated as treasonous. Fear of arrest, torture, and death at the hands of the police state became pervasive. Travelers risked arrest and disappearance.

With the loosening up of political conditions after 2011, there was a headlong push to sweep Myanmar into the global society of nations. Myanmar was described at that time as the world's best hope for rapid liberal democratic reform, and indeed, the economy did briefly grow rapidly, as a building boom began in Yangon, Mandalay, and other cities demonstrated. But unattended were festering ethnic issues focused by a reflexive insistence on rule from the Burmese-speaking center. Harsh military policies continued in the highlands where "ethnic armed organizations" provided alternative governance and areas of the north slipped

into an alliance with China. The centrality of the Burmanization narrative though was missed by the many foreign aid organizations focused on applying liberal models of good governance, peacebuilding, elections, free markets, federalism, and human rights as the basis for a democratic transition.

By 2012 federalism under the charismatic leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi was viewed by international donors as the way to a lasting peace. But the hope was not to last long, and in fact completely collapsed following the February 1, 2021, coup when the army again seized complete power, and large areas of the country slipped into an even more widespread civil war. Burmese-centric “People’s Defense Forces” seizing control of areas of cities, rural areas in Sagaing, and other areas. Highland “Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) expanded their control areas, too. And all attracted attacks by the still-powerful and well-armed military which used the tools of a violent government to reinstitute the oppressive Burmanized police state of 1962–2010 so many remembered. Today, the army is reinstating Ne Win’s authoritarian rule with its apparatus of arbitrary arrest, censorship, travel restrictions, midnight raids, and grinding war.

What were Burmanization policies of the 1960s, and why are they so important today? The answer is that the population since 1962 has continued with a *habitus* of discrimination, which puts Burmese language, culture, military, and identity at the center of the nation. Burmanization policies took for granted the supremacy of the Burmese Buddhist culture, a centralized economic system, and the disciplined quasi-military¹ government that held it together. These policies intensified the ethnic tensions and rekindled the violent conflicts which exploded into the Burmese Civil War in 1949–1952, and is the division that continues today.

There were of course many wishes that separatism and distrust would simply disappear as a result of good governance policies. One of the most important reasons for such thinking is wishful, is that the nature

¹ Saw Eh Htoo called this a quasi-military government because Ne Win constructed his government with military officers whom he could fully trust, but he also appointed some civilians. The government was still dominated by men who shared training the fight for liberation and World War II. Later cohorts would share experiences in military academies, and battles with the Burmese Communist Party, Nationalist Chinese armies, and Karen.¹ The term ‘Burmanization’ refers to the domination of other ethnic groups by the Burmese. According to Carol Ann Boshier (2018), the terms ‘Burmanized’ or ‘Burmanization’ were first used in the *Gazetteer of Upper Burma* and the Shan states in 1899.

of Ne Win's Burmanization policy of the 1960s means that not even the democratically elected NLD government could resolve decades of tensions. Even with the words on the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and the optimism of the massive People's Power demonstrations of 1988, 2006, and 2021, the Burmanized society prevailed. Burmanization had effected the NLD supporters as well, and they were afraid of foreign intervention, and internal betrayal, particularly by ethnics. Just how big such wishful thinking of the foreign peacebuilders was, is illustrated by the harsh coup of February 1, 2021, when the Bamar-dominated military again seized control of the country, sending Myanmar into a deeper civil war between the Bamar-dominated military and the rest of the country.

This is why this book looks at the consequences of Prime Minister General Ne Win's nation-building or "Burmanization" which began after 1962. Described is why and how these years are important for understanding the failed peace politics in Myanmar between the relatively open times between 2011 and the February 1, 2021, coup.

The harshest rule began when General Ne Win seized complete power in 1962. He restarted military operations in the geographically peripheral areas of Myanmar where ethnic minorities lived and simultaneously started deporting hundreds of thousands of Indian and Chinese from the cities. More fled to Thailand. Since that time, there have been glimmerings of hope for domestic change following the demonstrations of 1988, elections of 1990, further demonstrations in 2007, and relatively free elections in 2015 and 2020 which Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won, and was the basis for a power-sharing agreement with the military.

All of the hype and progress seen in 1988, 1990, 2007, 2015, and 2020 were crushed by military governments in the name of returning the nation to the people that Ne Win deemed the rightful heirs of the land, the Burmese Buddhists. They intuitively believed that the point of government, whether one ruled by the military or the NLD, was to return the country to a time when rulers created a powerful, prosperous, and disciplined kingdom.²

In crushing the opposition, three basic principles were returned to by the military time and time again by the military government. These are

² See Waters (2018) for a discussion of the nature of modern problem of discipline.

- (1) "The armed royal state" (*Le Net Nainggan Taw*) is normal for Burma. The only way the ancient city-state sustained itself was through hard power politics,
- (2) "We will have a strong nation if we have a powerful *Tatmadaw*" (*Tatmadaw Inarr Shi Ma, Taing Pyi Inarr Shi Me*).
- (3) The *Tatmadaw* stated emphatically that they themselves, unlike others, have never betrayed the national interest (*Tatmadaw the Amyothar Yey Koh Bae Tawt Ma Thitsar Ma Poak*).

The latter two principles in particular were embedded in the school curriculum, popular culture, and slogan-making that dominated Myanmar society since the 1962 coup.

2.2 THE BEGINNING OF NE WIN'S BURMANIZATION POLICIES: THE BURMESE BURDEN

This chapter opens with Saw Eh Htoo's adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's poem "White Man's Burden." The poem was written in 1899 and was addressed by Kipling to the United States, which recently had acquired The Philippines as its first colony. Kipling's poem was a cynical welcome to the Americans who were joining the greatest colonizer of all, Great Britain, in delivering the benefits of civilization to populations that Kipling acknowledged were uninterested in what Britain offered. But, as Kipling notes, this is beside the point—the resistance, and the presumed wildness of the Filipinos, is the justification for the American colonization itself. They will of course ask incredulously "Why brought ye us from bondage?" as if the only route from the bondage of savagery to the wonders of civilization is the British Raj, and the American civilizing mission. The plausible response for Kipling is that criticism of the noble intent of the colonizer is to be expected from someone who is "Half devil half child." The colonized cannot win against this type of reasoning.

Saw Eh Htoo's innovation is to point out that the Burmese military government since 1962 has a similar attitude toward the highland ethnic people and those who oppose them. The unquestionable goal of Ne Win's government was to bring the superior nature of the Burmese civilization to the mountains where those they believed "Half devil half child dwell." There the military officers and soldiers drafted into the ranks of the Burmese army will take up the "Burmese Burden," irrespective of the

opposition of people who are assumed to benefit but never offer a word of thanks. Only someone who is half devil half child after all would refuse the gift of Burmese culture, and retreat to the mountains to engage in violent lawless behavior. The reasoning may be tautological to a trained academic mind, but it is perhaps convincing the British, American, and Burmese colonizer's more vain mind.

Saw Eh Htoo as a Karen was not drafted into the Burmese military. Rather as written in his auto-biography, he instead pursued studies in Philosophy, Theology, Anthropology, and Peacebuilding. It was in the context of his M.A. in Anthropology that he had the most direct contact with the philosophy of the Burmese military. The Department of Anthropology at Yangon University was established by General Khin Nyunt, who was Director of Intelligence for many years, and briefly Prime Minister of Myanmar in 2004. Military Intelligence presumably wanted to use Anthropology to civilize the half wild children that they fought in their mountains since Independence, and indeed before and during World War II.³

In effect, Yangon University used anthropology to support military rule, in the same way that the US military PSYOPS used Ivy League anthropology to conduct counterinsurgency operations in World War II in the Philippine "Huk" insurgency of 1946–1951, and later in Vietnam. This move was put into the language of the "hearts and minds," of a peasantry presumed incapable of modern reason. The problem of course is that such anthropology was ineffective for insurgency operations undertaken by such well-educated PSYOPS operatives in the 1940s where it was first tried, until American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where it took on the name Human Terrain System.

Anthropology when conventionally practiced highlights the ineffectiveness of using military operations as "pacification" tools. Anthropology

³ American anthropology has long been critical of the relationships between academic anthropology as a discipline, and counter-insurgency operations. See McFate (2005) and Price (2016) for different views. See Price (1998) for an overview of how the Office of Strategic Services used anthropologists to create both white and black psychological operations in Burma.

describes highlanders opposing military incursions as something very different than “half devil, half child.” This is something that Saw Eh Htoo was well aware. Nevertheless, he appreciated the chance to get to know the Burmese military officers who were his classmates at the University of Yangon. It was through such interactions that he came to understand the inherent flaws in the *Tatmadaw*’s “anthropological” reasoning, and their assumption that Burmese civilization was a special burden. The very hostility of natives/ethnics was tautologically taken as evidence that the assumptions of British/American/Burmese superiority were correct.

2.3 NE WIN’S COLLABORATORS FROM THE DIRECTORATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

Different scholars argue that Burmanization started earlier than the period of Ne Win’s dictatorship (1962–1988) period because indeed the term was occasionally used, even by the British colonial authorities seeking to “Burmanize” the Indian civil service typically by promoting Karen, Kachin, and others who the British trusted more than the ethnic Bamar. It is clear that by the end of the British era in 1948, the government institutions the British dominated were more likely to be staffed by Karen, Chin, and Kachin, than by ethnic Bamar. This habitus manifested itself in World War II when the Bamar-dominated Burmese Independence Army (BIA) allied itself with the invading Japanese in 1942–early 1945, while the Karen, Kachin, and Chin units allied with the British (see e.g. Selth 2002: 8). In this context they fought each other on the battlefield, at least until the BIA switched sides in March 1945. The consequences of this split continue today, as the Burmese-speaking *Tatmadaw* continue to fight Karen, Kachin, and Chin ethnic armed groups.

Ne Win though had a new version of Burmanization which began after the coup in 1962. After General Ne Win seized power, he consolidated his authority over both the army as its commander, and the putatively civilian government as Prime Minister. This is the “Burmanization” described in this book. These are the policies that we believe are at the heart of why peace is so difficult to achieve seventy-five years after the authoritarian British left, and formal independence was achieved by

the Bamar-dominated Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL).⁴ These are the policies that put into action what Saw Eh Htoo described as the “Burmese Burden.”

2.3.1 *Ne Win, the Thirty Comrades, and the Celebration of Burma’s Army*

Ne Win was born in 1910 or 1911 north of Rangoon. He came of age in a country dominated politically by first the British Indian Civil Service, and second by social movements challenging British colonial rule.⁵ His father was a minor official in serving the British colonial power.

Ne Win himself participated in the nationalist movement and revolution beginning during the British colonial period while he was at the University of Rangoon where he was a student from 1929–1931 (Dr. Maung Maung 1969: 83). That anti-British nationalist movement became the foundation for the Burmese nationalist identity, which he would “Burmanize” decades later. In Rangoon he joined the Burmese nationalist group known as *Dobama Asiayone*, which became a nucleus of the opposition to British rule in the 1930s. Future leaders Aung San and U Nu were also members of this group.

This led to Ne Win’s recruitment into a group known as the “Thirty Comrades,” young leaders recruited by the Japanese and General Aung San to lead the overthrow of the British colonial rulers. The Thirty Comrades are today legendary in Burma history, and part of every school

⁴ Burmanization has been written about since at least 1924 when J. L. Lewis wrote *The Burmanization of the Karen People* as his master’s thesis. J. A. Berlie wrote *The Burmanization of Myanmar’s Muslim*. Both treatments reflect on the extreme discrimination Karen and Muslims before the British conquest in 1885 from the Royal Courts in the upper Irrawaddy River Delta which were Buddhist. They both comment on the “assimilation” of Karen and Muslims respectively under the British rule. Notably, this is different than the type of bureaucratized Burmanization policies introduced by Ne Win in 1962.

⁵ Ne Win’s Burmanization policy started with his personal belief about his own Bamar Buddhist identity as righteous relative to the barbaric minorities who had no writing, literature, or palace culture. Bamar Buddhist Burmese identity as superior to that of the usurpers from Great Britain, and their Indian subalterns. The Chinese who arrived in more recent decades were also considered outsiders. Each were viewed by Ne Win as illegitimate colonizers, farmers, and traders, usurping Burmese rights via the force of British arms, Chinese trickery, and Indian land grabs. In response to his Chinese policies, rumors that Ne Win had a Chinese ancestor circulated widely.

curriculum. Leaders would achieve senior positions in both the future BIA of General Aung San, and the Burmese Communist Party (BCP).

The “Thirty Comrades” were provided military training in Japanese-occupied Hainan for about six months in 1941. There, the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) was organized under the leadership of General Aung San, and Japanese military trainers. The training reflected the harsh standards of Japanese officer training which emphasized military discipline in which slapping, and the physical assault of trainees were common.⁶ The Thirty Comrades then accompanied the Japanese to Thailand, where in Bangkok they, and their Japanese commander, each poured blood into a cup, from which each drank, and pledged their lives to the liberation of Burma. From there the thirty original comrades were organized into brigades which had Japanese and Burmese officers and were tasked with the raising of Burmese soldiers for the planned invasion of Burma from Thailand. Initial recruitment was in Bangkok of Burmese migrants. Ne Win himself was tasked with infiltrating Rangoon in order to raise support for the invasion.

The invasion of Burma began in February–March 1942. The reception of the BIA by a Burmese civilian population weary of British domination was enthusiastic, and tens of thousands rushed to join the invading BIA army. It would take about five months of fighting for the Japanese and BIA to expel the Indo-British, including British-funded Karen, Chin, and Kachin units to India. In the process; Karen villagers at Hpapun in today’s Karen State, and at Myaungmya deep within the Irrawaddy River Delta were massacred. It was such massacres that Eh Htoo’s grandfather told him about when he was a boy (see also Thako and Waters 2023).

The invading force was primarily made up of units of the Japanese Imperial Army in the name of anti-British colonialism, and creating Japan’s Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. In this context, the State of Burma was proclaimed in August 1943, with lawyer Ba Maw as President, Aung San as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, and U Nu as Minister of Foreign Affairs. General Ne Win was commander of the renamed Burma National Army (BNA). Baw Ma and U Nu were

⁶ See Callahan (2003: 48, 60–63) and Lintner (1999: 41–43). Training continued in 1943 in a new officer academy started at Mingaldon north of Rangoon. The curriculum was designed and delivered by Japanese trainers who slapped trainees who disobeyed orders barked in Japanese. Ne Win was an officer at the school, and was known for valuing “mental toughness” in recruits.

not members of the Thirty Comrades, but both were former prisoners of the British, arrested for undermining the British colonial government in 1940, and released only in the wake of the Japanese-BIA invasion. By 1944, though, the Burmese BIA felt betrayed by the Japanese who never granted real independence; and Aung San's began negotiating secretly with the British in India in late 1944.

The Thirty Comrades led by General Aung San, Ne Win's commander, became the independent leader negotiating the decolonization of British Burma. General Aung San and his Anti-Fascist People's Force League (AFPFL) negotiated with the British a new Constitution that would grant independence on January 4, 1948. A first compromise was buried in the Constitution to assist reluctant Shan and Karenni leaders. The Constitution promised that they could hold an independence referendum after remaining in the Union of Burma for ten years. A second compromise called for a unified army, which would include units from the BIA, and the British King's Rifles of the Karen, Chin, and Kachin fighters. The first commander would be the Karen General Smith Dun, and his Deputy the BIA General Ne Win. Both compromises would prove unreconcilable with future national goals; they were in effect "poison pills" from the perspective of the military.

Aung San was assassinated on July 19, 1947, six months before independence in July 1948, along with four of his cabinet members. The assassination, which was undertaken by General Aung San's Burmese political rivals, disoriented the country fast moving toward independence from Britain. The consequences of Aung San's assassination of course in Myanmar are felt even today. General Aung San's daughter is the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who led the National League for Democracy (NLD) beginning in 1988 and became State Counselor in Myanmar following a landslide election victory in 2015. Her popularity was based in the large Bamar-speaking areas of the country.

Ne Win himself was named Commander of the Army in The Japanese dominated State of Burma in 1943, and was part of the army's plan to switch to the British side. After the Allied victory, he was allied with the returning British, and organized attacks against the Burmese Communist Party on behalf of the British.

Karen General Smith Dun though was named the first commander of the new Tatmadaw, an amalgamation of the British allied forces which Dun had commanded, and the BIA of General Aung San. General Smith Dun was dismissed though from the army weeks after independence, as

Karen units left the army because they believed the British reneged on a promise of an independent Karenistan. Smith Dun's deputy, General Deputy General Ne Win was promoted to be head of the army, Deputy Prime Minister, Home Minister, and Defense Minister. His immediate duty was rallying the parts of the army which had not mutinied,⁷ and push back revolts by the Karen on the outskirts of Rangoon, and Communist armies which occupied northern Burma. At its height, this rebellion almost resulted in the capture of Rangoon by the Karen Armies at the Battle of Insein four miles from Rangoon, in May 1949. They occupied other major cities until 1950.⁸

Thus, Prime Minister U Nu's government for a few months really only controlled Rangoon. The north, including the second city Mandalay, was for a time controlled by the Burmese Communist and the Karen forces. Ne Win as commander-in-chief of the army during U Nu's civilian premiership (1949–1962) was viewed as a hero for rescuing U Nu's government from near defeat. Ne Win would go on to be acting Prime Minister for 18 months from 1958 to 1960 at the invitation of U Nu who considered the army to be more efficient and cleaner than civilian power centers which were known for corruption. Ne Win would use this brief time to harshly clamp down on corruption and also send officers on shopping trips abroad to purchase new weapons. Thus, the basis for the 1962 coup d'état was the military style discipline which Ne Win valued.

Most significantly for the future, Ne Win's first stint as Prime Minister convinced his officers that they alone had the discipline to operate the government. This approach was to be the basis for his Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) which after 1962 would be created to legitimate the power of the army.

⁷ Kachin units also mutinied, and left the new army. They joined Karen forces in the west, Communist forces in the north, and so forth, beginning in February 1948. Karen who did not mutiny, were put in "rest camps" because they were not trusted. See Callahan (2003: 132–135).

⁸ Mary Callahan (2003: 36–40) notes that small independent militia groups have strong traditions in Burma, and are called *Tat*, which she translates as "political pocket armies." They are locally organized, and in opposition to centralized authorities. Such *Tat* were not only the nemesis of Ne Win and his *Tatmadaw* (Royal Army), but earlier Kings, the British, and it can be argued, are the predecessors of today's People's Defense Forces (PDF), and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs).

2.3.2 *Burmese Dominance*

The emphasis on Burmese-dominance (*Bamar Baho Phyu*) was taught in the centralized school system Saw Eh Htoo experienced as a boy in the Irrawaddy Delta and Yangon. All was focused on the glories of the Burmese people, especially General Aung San and his “Thirty Comrades,” including Ne Win himself.

Some English-writing scholars describe Ne Win’s administration as successful, because it created a strong sense of identity where there had been none, and seemingly eliminated the foreign influences from Britain, India, China, and the United States which threatened Burma militarily during the Burmese Civil War (1949–1952), and later through economic domination. Ne Win’s academic sympathizers (in English see e.g. Taylor 2009; Aung Thwin 2012; in Burmese see Maung Maung 1969; Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013) all emphasize that Ne Win was independent, and created an independent nation with a revitalized national identity no longer threatened by outsiders. Often they point out that Ne Win’s government avoided the catastrophic Great Power proxy wars that consumed neighbors like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Most English writers believed Ne Win failed abysmally (see Maung Maung Gyi 1983; Shwe Lu Maung 1989; Mya Maung 1991; Steinberg 2012), typically focusing on the economic collapse of sectors in the country while Ne Win ruled from 1962 to 1988, the implementation of harsh totalitarian police state, and the re-emergence of revolt in large areas of the (see Smith 1991; Callahan 2003; South 2008; Myint-U 2008, 2021). Focus is typically on the collapse of economic productivity as measured by international trade, and GDP capita, all measures by which Myanmar went into decline relative to its neighbors. What is typically missing from these approaches, though, is any interest in the actual content of Ne Win’s Burmanization policies, even though this is the ideology underlying the state and society, even today. Failure or not, Ne Win’s Burmanization ideology permeates all corners of Myanmar society that government institutions touched. And it also shapes the reaction in the many corners of Myanmar where the army finds its enemies.

2.4 THE CONTENT FOR NE WIN'S BURMANIZATION POLICIES

Ne Win based his rule on memories of Burmese civilizational greatness, and oppression by the British colonialists and their Indian subalterns. Ne Win first sought approaches inherited from the powerful Bamar kings of the central plains who dominated their neighbors and maintained a large royal army (the *Tatmadaw*). The final king was deposed by the British only in 1885, in the Third British Burma War, a date in the living memory until at least the 1950s. The *Tatmadaw*'s restoration of 1962 viewed martial strength as the basis for independence and military weakness as the cause of foreign aggression.

In response, Ne Win developed policies about Burmese hegemony, now known collectively as "Burmanization" which he believed would revive times of greatness. In doing so, he drew on the traditional understanding of Burmese kingship rooted in Buddhism, the dominant religion of the majority of Bamar, as well as Shan, Mon, and many Karen. Traditional Burmese monarchs believed that being a Buddhist king was a sign of being a *Bodhisatta*, that is, a Buddha-to-be whom the heavenly cosmos granted the responsibility to rule (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 20).

Such rulers brought the charismatic authority of the heavens known as *Barami* which resulted in wisdom and justice. It is admittedly a circular argument. You were called to rule out of wisdom and justice, so the rule must be wise and just. Circular reasoning or not, such views are largely taken for granted in charismatic politics from Myanmar, and many other countries.⁹

In practice, this meant that Ne Win justified ruling central Burma with an iron fist, with the liberal use of secret police, informants, disappearances, prison, and police. For the distant corners of the mountainous country, there were military attacks. This was done with the military

⁹ Tun (1994: 90–91) describes kingship in the following manner "The divine right theory of Kingship is not applicable to the Myanmar King. Because in the divine theory, it is accepted that a certain person had God's exclusive blessings to have a right to rule. But the Myanmar ideas on kingship system come from the Buddhist theory that the most fit per shall rule because of his intrinsic merit. Myanma believed in reincarnation together with the concept that one's good in this life gives best opportunities in his next life and as such, the king must have a very meritorious past and this extended, the greater the king, the more meritorious he becomes and therefore near a future Buddha..."

discipline that General Ne Win brought from his own military experience in World War II and the Burmese Civil War, in which unquestioned obedience was assumed. The Burmese language and culture, and Burmese Theravada Buddhism inherited from the powerful kings were also considered superior. To consolidate the power that the army sought to establish, Ne Win reformed the economy, political structures, and ethnic relations. He pointed to the success of his political coup as evidence that his mighty plans for the future of Burma were wise and just, and would succeed.

For the world, Ne Win justified his coup in 1962 by pointing to a need to stop the civil war then being reported on in British newspapers, even though the wars were burning out. During the previous ten years cease-fires (formal and informal) were agreed to by the Burmese government, Burmese Communist Party rebels in the north, and the Karen rebels to the west, and further rebellions by Shan, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine, and others. This is what is particularly tragic; implementation of the Burmanization policies after 1962 would rekindle the revolts among the Kachin, Shan, Karen, and others which had died down in the 1950s.

Yet, in Ne Win's own reading, there was yet more to it: His coup paved the way for a specific policy that is his "Burmese Way to Socialism." This Burmese Way to Socialism, replaced the 1947 constitution granted by the British at the time of independence. The driving force behind the Burmese Way to Socialism was Ne Win's insistence on a nationalistic process that incorporated military rule and what he called "socialist" economic policies. In the name of Burmanization, Ne Win's regime nationalized the business sectors, and expelled Chinese, Indian, and European foreigners from Burma beginning (see Holmes 1967).

Just as he had in his brief time in power in 1958–1960, Ne Win strengthened the Burmese-speaking army with the goal of defeating the ethnic militia, dozens of which were (and still are) present in the mountainous peripheries of Burma.¹⁰ The dominance of the ethnic Burmans in Burmese politics was legitimized based on the assumed glories of the ancient Burma kingdoms. And indeed, before the first conquests of the British in 1824, the hegemonic sway of Burma in Southeast Asia

¹⁰ Since 1949, Burma's periphery has been controlled off and on by dozens of ephemeral ethnic militias and the forces of the Burmese Communist Party and has endured the presence of permanent militaries, such as the Karen National Defense Organization, the Kachin Independence Army, the Mon New State Party, the Shan State Army, and 'colorful rebel', which are called *Young Sone Thabone* in Burmese.

was impressive. Burmese kings successfully conquered areas in the west (Rakhine), east (Siam), and fended off the Chinese from the north.

Internationally, Ne Win's Burmanization continued U Nu's neutralism, rejecting both Western capitalism and Eastern communism. He did this with a vengeance, though, expelling any element viewed as foreign, and withdrawing from international organizations. Holmes (1967: 188) was perhaps the first Western writer to apply the term "Burmanization" to Ne Win's rule. His perspective was that two factors were instrumental in the formulation, of this policy:

- (1) Xenophobia among the highly nationalistic members of the Burmese Revolutionary Council government, who desired to eliminate the vestiges of the previous dominant foreign cultural and economic influence and to initiate a process of Burmanization; and
- (2) Lingering hostility toward the United States, stemming from the suspicion that the US sought to dominate the country.

In this context, Ne Win approved a thirty-year action plan with the long-term goal of expanding the influence of Theravada Buddhists in Burma (Dr. Hla Myint 2018: 36). This plan in turn was based on the intellectual works that three of Ne Win's collaborators had begun at the Directorate Psychological Warfare in the 1950, before Ne Win's coup. The head of the army at the time was General Ne Win.

2.5 NE WIN'S INTELLECTUAL COLLABORATORS, ON THE BURMESE WAY TO SOCIALISM FROM THE DIRECTORATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

General Ne Win was a soldier with a soldier's mindset, dedication, and focus on discipline and obedience. But he also sought well-educated people to support his regime. He did not really consult with those so-called educated people (or anyone else), but rather dictated to them his plans, and expected them to assume responsibility for implementation (Taylor 2015: 260). The key philosophers helping General Ne Win with his Burmanization policies were U Chit Hlaing (also known as Ko Ko Maung Gyi); Major General Aung Gyi; and Dr. Maung Maung. These were the groups that came together in 1962 to create the Burmese socialist narrative that would legitimate Ne Win's regime, create the

discipline he sought, and habituate the population to his authoritarian practices. Their work was to be the basis for the curriculum Eh Htoo would be indoctrinated within the Burmese school system decades later.

A closer look at the development of his political thought in the context of Burma's military politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s helps clarify Ne Win's decision to develop two texts based on intellectuals who worked at the Directorate of Psychological Warfare. The two texts were the Policy Declaration of the *Burmese Way to Socialism*, and *The System of Correlation between Man and His Environment* (Nakanishi 2013: 63).¹¹

Ne Win emphasized in his orders, "We are planning to form a party and open the training center. We need a guiding philosophy for the party. We are sure to emphasize the economic sector, but we also need philosophy" (see Ko Ko Maung Gyi, 2011: 190–192). The modified guideline they inherited from the Directorate of Social Warfare, and developed a "Guardian Government" philosophy which drew on elements of Marxism and Buddhism. The draft philosophy had six sub-titles, reflecting an eclectic mix of a Marxist focus on dialectics, and a Buddhist emphasis on control of the mind.

1. Dialectic of Matter and Mind
2. Reciprocal Relations of Matter and Mind
3. Dialectics of Man and His Environment
4. Reciprocal Relations of Man and His Environment
5. Dialectical Correlation of Matter and Mind
6. Dialectical Correlation of Man and His Environment (p. 192)

The titles focusing on matter, mind, and environment may seem opaque to the Western eye from outside Burma. But these principles reshaped Burma's society. For the ethnic minorities, these were to be the ideological means for policies of assimilation of cultural traditions. In the 1970s, this would become the violent "Four Cuts Policies" which sought to violently enforce conformity to these values.

¹¹ Ne Win assigned two other key people to the project, including Colonel Saw Myint, and U Saw Oo (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 174).

2.5.1 *U Chit Hlaing (Ko Ko Maung Gyi)*

U Chit Hlaing (also known as U Khin Maung Gyi, and Ko Ko Maung Gyi 1926-2018) was from Katha township, which is in upper Burma. He studied at the Katha High School, which was a Roman Catholic missionary school where they used English as a teaching language. According to his 2011 auto-biography, in 1939, a student riot changed his life, and he became a political activist (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 3). He met with student leaders from the University of Rangoon, and started to study the books from Nagani (Red Dragon) Books. Most of the books were Communist books, and U Chit Hlaing took an intense interest in Communism. He joined the Burma Independence Army (BIA) and became a soldier during World War II (Ko Ko Maung Gyi: 2014: 80–93), and then in the early 1950s, studied in France and Russia. During his days in France, he attended Jean-Paul Sartre's lectures (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 618). After his studies, he returned to Burma and served in U Nu's government as a civilian, where he was assigned to the Directorate of Psychological Warfare in the Ministry of Defense.

U Chit Hlaing drafted what became Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism," based on his work at the Directorate of Psychological Warfare. He finalized a draft of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" within seven months following the 1962 coup, and submitted it to Ne Win in December. Emphasized was "The correlation of matter and mind." This concept assumes that leftist and rightist ideas should be avoided. According to General Ne Win, leftists over-emphasized materialism, and rightists over-emphasized idealism. He said he wanted to avoid both extremes and be only based on humanism (2011: 193). U Chit Hlaing asserted that this idea was different from that of the Burmese Communist Party with its emphasis on dialectical materialism, which of course was an enemy of the government (Myat Khine 2009: 48). With this in mind, "The Burmese Way to Socialism" was announced on January 17, 1963. Colonel Ba Than then translated the manifesto into English, and Dr. Maung Maung edited it (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 194). Ne Win used it as a philosophy for his political goals.

2.5.2 *General Aung Gyi (1919–2012)*

The second important figure who collaborated with Ne Win in developing the philosophical grounding of the new government was Major

General Aung Gyi, who was an officer in the BIA in the 1940s, and instrumental in engineering the coup of 1958 (Callahan 2003: 74, 198–199). In preparing the Burmese Road to Socialism, he was known for emphasizing socialist economics.

At the time of the 1962 coup, General Aung Gyi was close to General Ne Win and was Ne Win's Vice Chair for the Union Revolutionary Council, and "heir apparent." This high appointment reflected his roles in drafting the Burmese Way to Socialism at the Directorate of Psychological Warfare, his role in the 1958 coup, and his long service with Ne Win in the military command dating back to the BIA starting in World War II. While in office he probably orchestrated the violent crackdown on the University of Rangoon students who protested the 1962 coup. General Aung Gyi was though removed in 1963 from the Ne Win administration, over disagreements regarding the expulsion of Chinese and Indian minorities, which was a key part of the new Burmanization policies.¹²

2.5.3 *Dr. Maung Maung*

Dr. Maung Maung was known as a gentleman and scholar who earned doctoral degrees in law from both the University of Utrecht in Holland, and Yale University in the United States. Dr. Maung Maung was active in Ne Win's government until 1988, and indeed for a brief time after Ne Win stepped down, served as President. He was not a military man, but served Ne Win well as a journalist, legal scholar, and in high positions as Attorney General and Chief Justice. An admiring Robert H. Taylor (2008: 3) wrote that,

Dr. Maung Maung was a man of many parts – a scholar and a soldier, a nationalist and an internationalist, a parliamentarian and a public servant – and his life and times spanned seven decades of political, economic and social turbulence in the country he loved and served, Myanmar.

¹² General Aung Gyi's time as a loyal number two to General Ne Win was short, and he resigned from the government in 1964. The disagreement precipitating the resignation started with the nationalization of the so-called bourgeoisie and foreign descended families including the Anglo-Burmese, Chinese, and Indian. After his removal from office, imprisonment in (1965–1968, and 1973–1974), he remained loyal to the military, and General Ne Win. In 1988, he re-emerged as a founder of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, while still advocating for a continuing role of the military in politics.

Robert Taylor portrayed Dr. Maung Maung as the most important agent serving the regime from behind the scenes. In his early life, he started by enlisting in the successor to Aung San's Burma Independence Army (BIA) the Burma National Army (BNA) after the British retreated to India. The BNA turned on the occupying Japanese in 1945 and created an alliance with the British before the end of World War II. After independence, Maung Maung joined the government service (Taylor 2008: 4) and in the 1950s, he pursued his academic interests in Western countries. With government scholarship programs he earned higher degrees in law in England and the USA. It was on this basis he created for himself a role as the honored historian-professor for Ne Win.

In the late 1950s, Dr. Maung Maung wrote influential newspaper columns and books. His English described Myanmar to the world, even as he was assigned to the Psychological War Department.¹³ Following the 1962 coup, he became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Dr. Maung Maung worked as a Chief Justice, Attorney General, and State Central Executive Member. He was part of the constitution-making of 1974. He even served for a month as President following the student demonstrations of 1988. When U Chit Hlaing was playing his role as a socialist philosopher, Dr. Maung Maung was on the other side focused on nationalism and the creation of a Burmese identity.

These three collaborators U Chit Hlaing, General Aung Gyi, and Dr. Maung Maung provided Ne Win with the foundation of the Burmese Way to Socialism beginning in the Psychological War Directorate in the 1950s and were ready to implement it immediately after the coup on March 2, 1962.

¹³ Robert Taylor compiled the English writings, broadcasts, and speeches in a book *Dr. Maung Maung, Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot*. Most of the included articles are from the 1948–1963. Included are a few examples of his speeches from August–September 1988 when he was President of Burma. There is much in his writing about legal theories, the nature of the Burmese people, Buddhism, and the value of constitutional government. Missing is any significant mention of the ethnic tensions which then and now bedevil Burma/Myanmar.

2.6 SHAPING A BURMANIZED NARRATIVE

Ne Win's Burmanization policy rested on three pillars, which were Burmese Theravada Buddhism; Burmese language and culture; and the importance of military control and discipline for society. The three pillars were Ne Win's gold standard for evaluating Burmeseness.

Three principles underpinned these elements. They were

1. National identity is formed by the Burmese Buddhist culture.
2. The national economy needs to be a centralized system, around the military.
3. The national government has to be a quasi-military government, in which the Burmese army plays the central role.

As will be described, these foundational principles emerged from the 1960s leading to explicit policies of assimilation, accommodation, and alienation for the one-third of Burma's population who were not Bamar. These policies continued into the 1970s when Ne Win presented his regime as a uniquely patriotic institution that successively prevented the disintegration of the country after independence. From this, the Ne Win government created a nationalism with a specifically Burmese identity necessary to perpetuate the centrality of the Burmese-speaking military. The military, economy, schools, Buddhism, and cultural institutions were all infused with an assertion that the military, market, and culture must serve these goals.

These foundational principles are taken for granted by the peoples of Burma, but are often passed over in the English-language literature which views such policies as inchoate ideology that digress from the core goals of the international foreign policy establishment which focused on good governance, free markets, democracy, and international alliances. But Ne Win's ideology was taken for granted in Burma and is deeply embedded in the *habitus* of Burmese belief. Thant Myint-U (2021: 32) is of course critical of Ne Win's ideology which he finds confusing and inchoate, albeit for good reason. He wrote "The official ideology was a half-baked mélange of socialist, nationalist, and Buddhist ideas," which was perhaps all true. Erin Murphy (2022: 116) reported, that Kurt Campbell, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, complained of the

meetings with UN Representative Than Shwe.¹⁴ Campbell told her that his meetings with the UN Representative were “fairly unproductive [in a] four hour meeting in which Than Swe digressed on the history of Myanmar.”¹⁵

2.6.1 *Buddhism and Nat Worship*

Religion is elemental to Burmese politics and identity. 85% of the population though is Buddhist, including almost all of the Bamar speakers who are perhaps two-thirds of the nation's population. Behind Buddhism though are major sources of ethical and political understanding regarding governance. These views are pervasive, and Burma's generals have long sought to capture the monkhood with the legitimacy of Buddhist teaching, which is so important to everyday understanding, and *nat* worship as a way to sustain power (see Cockett 2015: 70–72).

The Theravada Buddhism of Burma emerged from the ancient Pali literature. Theravada Buddhism, the historians point out, came from the southern Burma of Burma where Mon civilization flourished widely for over 1000 years before the arrival of the Burmese in the tenth century CE. Southern Buddhism started separately with King Asoka in India, who sent Buddhist missionaries to different regions. Two venerable monks, Shin Thana and Shin Uttma, arrive in Thaton where the Mon Kingdom flourished (Ashin Kayla Tha 2011: 18; South 2003: 54–56). There they started preaching among the people of the ancient Mon Kingdom where the preexisting belief system rested on *nat* spirits.

¹⁴ Note that this is a different person than Senior General Than Shwe who was the leader of the SLORC and SPDC government in the 1990s and 2000s (sometimes the UN Ambassador's name is spelled Than Swe, which is slightly different). See also Maciel (2023: 291).

¹⁵ Apparently by the time Hillary Clinton visited in 2011, the Burmese gave up on the history lessons. Murphy (2022: 147–149) writes of her visit with General Shwe Mann, then Speaker of the Parliament, but previously a key member of the SPDC junta, “Shwe Mann had an agenda and wanted to get right into it; he figured Clinton had received enough history lessons and was a smart lady, so there was not need to waste time [on more history lessons],” and noted that he was training himself about American history by watching the television program “The West Wing.” Clinton apparently warmed to Shwe Mann's fluency with western development-speak, and eagerly got to the needs of her bureaucracy which was “a package of ‘deliverables,’ a set of policy measures or carrots that high-level officials are prepared to offer on trips like this.”

Nevertheless, it was difficult for even Ne Win's historians to make the connection with Burmese Buddhism as practiced in the 1960s and military rule. A way to tie this together was by focusing on the traditional Burmese spirit worship, known as *nat*, which had origins in Hinduism and animism. This connected Ne Win to King Anawrahta's epoch. Maung Htin Aung (1959: 1–2) explained that “Nat worship before the arrival of Buddhism, during the emergence of Burmese Buddhism, and even today, was not only in upper Burma, but also in hill areas.” It was said that before there was even Pagan, two cities existed: Old Vishnu and Hanlin, demonstrating that Buddhism and Hinduism had co-existed during the time of King Anawrahta and perhaps before. Most importantly, this was used to legitimate rule by the Burmese Buddhists in the 1960s.

Reforming Burmese Buddhism in the manner sought by the military government of Ne Win meant first reigning in the monkhood, and making sure that it did not present an alternative power center. Most important for the military are the concepts of centralized rule. Second, it meant recovering and regarding long-term peace and human development, teachings that could be propagated by a massive state-supported/dependent monkhood. The reasoning continued, the state is by definition a part of the people, and it does not simply refer to the government. Buddhist monks accept food offerings from the general public, but they must remain separate from the secular world in order to teach Buddha's method of redressing the world's inequity. The rule followed by the Sangha group is democratic in nature, according to Sulak Sivaraksa, a well-known Thai academic. Buddha left the Dhamma (Buddha's teaching) and Vinaya (monks' rules) to the people, which the military government assumed meant them.¹⁸

As for politics, the leader of a nation, a king, formally inherited moral rules that emphasized the Buddhist middle way, i.e. not right nor left, capitalist, or communist. The ten moral rules for the kings are as follows:

- (1) Donation
- (2) Maintaining good morals
- (3) Sacrificing the king's life if necessary
- (4) Follow the righteous path
- (5) Gentleness
- (6) On the Sabbath, preserve the eight moral virtues
- (7) No rage
- (8) Do not torture others

- (9) Maintain tolerance
- (10) Avoid doing things that are inconvenient to the people they rule
(Ashin Kayla Tha 2011: 104).

As for the King himself, he possessed a *Barami*, which was the mandate from the heavens which reflected virtuous behavior in previous lives. *Barami* is a charismatically derived authority that leaders by their very nature have and is that concept central to the exercise of power in Thailand¹⁶ and Burma in particular. The King in response has a responsibility to use this power wisely, and will always seek to do so. Since such power comes from the heavens downward, there the polity tends to be centralized in the palace, rather than in dispersed provinces (see Waters 2022a; Waters and Panyakhom 2021).

If the country's leaders use their *Barami* wisely, justice and equality will flourish. The Sangha is the communal check that exists to challenge the actions of the rulers. The Sangha is effective for this because it has a social goal different from the King and balances his earthly power. In order to achieve *nirvana*, monks give up the world. They are unattached to the ordinary world in which their country's leaders live and seek power. Sangha and the people, according to Myanmar's political scientists, rely on each other to jointly address political, social, and economic challenges. Only the Sangha and those who understand and practice the Dhamma, can build a peaceful and tranquil country.¹⁷

2.6.2 *Burmese Buddhist Identity*

Along with Burmese Buddhism, Burmese identity was highlighted as a central value holding the nation of Burma together. Ne Win's Socialist government wrote Burma's political history, and prepared ethnographies that would provide the highland groups with a rationale for what could be preserved, and more importantly what would be assimilated into the larger Burmese identity. Ethnographies of the Kachin, Kayah (Karenni) Kayin (Karen), Chin, Mon, Rakhine,

¹⁶ The King's song in Thailand has the word *Barami* in its title, and the first line of the hymn. For descriptions of Barami in Thai traditions see Jory (2002) and Waters (2022b).

¹⁷ See e.g. Sulak Sivaraksa. 2010. *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*. Souvenir Press. ISBN 978-0-9821656-1-4.

and Shan were written with this in mind. The ethnographies focused on issues such as dress, dance, food, and non-political characteristics which could be easily documented in museum displays. Left out were the more distinctive features of even these seven groups, which would have focused on differences with the Burmese, especially the distinctive languages, memories of Burmese oppression, and in the case of the Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Chin, large Christian communities. These groups were recognized as indigenous and therefore “Burmese,” but the policy for them was to assimilate into the Burmese institutions of Rangoon, and later Naypyitaw. In this they were to be nurtured, as described in Saw Eh Htoo’s *Burmese Burden*, on the assumption that relative to the Burmese, they were half devil and half child. As for substantial Muslim minorities found in Rakhine, (i.e. Rohingya), they could not be assimilated, and therefore not Burmese.

Assumptions like this that full adulthood meant assimilating dominant Burmese Buddhist norms, and restricting ethnicity to dress, food, and non-political features of society, would lead to catastrophe and active revolt. And only, preferably, only on holidays!

2.6.3 *The Military*

A grand military narrative became central to Burma’s political history as schooling spread out from the Psychological Warfare Directorate to Ne Win’s Ministry of Education after 1962. Throughout the narrative, the Ne Win government promoted the military’s role as the necessary agent in Burma. Previous royal dynasties were all led by great warriors, including King Anawratha, King Bayinnaung, and King Aung Zay Ya, who all had a royal army called *Tatmadaw*. The assumption was that Ne Win’s *Tatmadaw* continued with this ancient role—they were the logical heirs to great kings. This indeed was explicitly articulated in BSPP documents (see e.g. BSPP—1st Volume, 1970: 33), with the assumption being that Ne Win himself in 1962 inherited the kingly responsibility to rule.

Thus, Ne Win and his scholars created a Burmanized narrative where non-Burmese were subjects of Burma’s King and Burma’s socialist government he prescribed. Military traditions, Burmese identity, and Burmese Buddhism created space for the ultra-nationalists in the first place, who also needed enemies who could only be controlled through

the use of military force. These new Burmese Road to Socialism narratives would socialize deeply into every level of Burmese society via mass schooling, popular culture, and isolation from the rest of the world.

The narrative was made all the more plausible in the context of Chinese and American expansionism across the 1960s and 1970s in Southeast Asia, particularly the American wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The military catastrophes in these countries made plausible Ne Win's claims that the only thing keeping Burma out of the wars was the strength of the *Tatmadaw*, and a disciplined population. Even then, it was contended, Chinese and American involvement in the highlands, where they often sponsored clients and the drug economy flourished, was still a problem even as Ne Win's grip on the country tightened. This argument would continue to be made into the 1990s and 2000s, a time when China continued to seek investment in Myanmar, and the United States sought to influence policy through the application of sanctions. The fact that the Chinese infrastructure was never built, and the American sanctions ineffective, was viewed as a success by the generals.

2.7 THE COLLAPSE OF PEACE INITIATIVE IN BURMA (2015–2021)

The broader world came to believe that Myanmar was passing out of Ne Win's world of Kings, Socialism, and Buddhism with the liberalization by the Thein Sein government beginning in 2010. From the outside perspective, it seemed to be the beginning of normal politics and economy, particularly following the NLD victory in the 2015 elections, and the coalition government formed between the victorious NLD and the outgoing military government. With the signing of the National Ceasefire Agreements of 2015 by the Burmese military the transition seemed complete. The transition in Burma was viewed optimistically by diplomats who patted themselves on the back for engineering the transition. All that was left was for Myanmar's people to finish the job.¹⁸

But there was an unnoticed problem. During the time of military rule (1962–2015), a deep Burmanization *habitus* was engineered into the population by the ruling military government. This *habitus* was rooted in

¹⁸ Many optimistic consulting reports were written about Myanmar's presumed tradition to a forma liberal democracy between the adoptions of the 2008 Constitution and 2021 coup. See e.g. Woods (2017), and USIP (2017).

fear, and took for granted not only the fear, but also patterns of thought about history, religious rationale, “The Other” and the righteousness of Burmese Buddhist military rule. The depth of the authoritarian *habitus* was not readily seen, whether in the successful implementation of the Rohingya expulsion/genocide, the resumption of the fighting in the highlands, or the reluctance of the Bamar-embedded NLD to intervene in a fashion the Western donors deemed righteous.¹⁹ The February 1, 2021, coup was the nail in the coffin for liberal democratic hopes and a forceful reassertion of ethno-military dominance.

2.7.1 *The Disappearance of the Liberal Democrats*

Faith in neo-liberal peacebuilding was particularly strong in the context of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who won her prize for the promotion of nonviolent means of resistance, and her insistence that courage is needed to overcome the fears propagated during the violent military rule. She was the charismatic leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) which won a resounding electoral victory in the by-elections of 2012, and then in November 2015. In 2016, she became the de facto leader of Myanmar. Her efforts were enthusiastically cheered by Western donors who viewed her as a leading figure in the struggle for democracy and openness in Myanmar.

However, the Western donors little understood the depth of divisions within the Burmanized society were to be disappointed. Aung San Suu Kyi had for the West, made her name by resisting the military government, writing a book about the power of nonviolence, and patiently enduring periods of confinement which lasted decades, but that is all they seemed to see. She was also the charismatic leader of the Burmese-speaking masses who were raised in an isolated Burma, and deeply believed in the ethnocentric assertions of Ne Win’s decades of conditioning to Burmanization (see Myat 2019; Lubina 2021).

The problem is perhaps that peace and prosperity the West seemed to argue, simply a matter of negotiation, compromise, the holding of fair elections, and opening to foreign investment. There is little discussion of cultural habitus. Whatever was in the past could be taken care

¹⁹ Cheeseman (2016) wrote a nuanced view of this problem and the Burmese concept of *taingyintha* which was used by the Ne Win government to define who was a national race and who was not. Central to this definition is the relationship to British colonialism.

of through the formulaic medium of peacebuilding workshops using best practice formulas discovered in Colombia, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. The Norwegian government and the European Union in particular stepped in to fund what was needed. In 2015–2016, optimism was in the air that Burma would move past the excesses of authoritarian rule.

But the glow of the 2015 ceasefire and the successful emergence of the NLD-elected government in 2016 disappeared quickly, for both the west and the highlanders. Under the 2008 Constitution, the military still controlled the armed forces, and the NLD emerged from a thoroughly Burmanized population. In this context, in August 2017, the army coordinated expulsions of the Rohingya Muslims, and the ruling NLD with its roots in the Burmanized masses acquiesced. The army contended that under the citizenship laws on the books, the Rohingya were illegal immigrants, and as Muslims, a threat to the existence of Burma as a Buddhist state. The expulsions would be labelled as genocide by the international community. As for the highlanders, the ceasefires began to break down too in bits and pieces, as the military pushed into territory traditionally held by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) with road-building crews, school takeovers, police, and military.

2.7.2 *The Continuing Narrative of Burmese Exceptionalism and the Rohingya*

Decades of Indo-British propaganda during colonialism, and then the Burmese nationalism originating from the Directorate of Psychological Warfare asserted that the Muslim farmers living in Rakhine State were from India. The propaganda asserted that the Rohingya were an ongoing threat to the Burmese Buddhist identities, a finding reinforced via decades of schooling, movies, and television. The assumption was that such people, many of whom traced their ancestry back to what is today Bangladesh, were usurpers on land they were granted by the British colonial government between 1825 and 1938. This narrative in Burma became sharper and more threatening to the Burmese masses, as global hostility between Western and Islamic states sharpened after the 2001 attacks on the United States, and the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This confrontation was justification to the Burmese masses for expulsions which turned into ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya population in Rakhine. It was in this context that Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, acquiesced to the army's expulsion of 800,000

Muslim Rohingya in 2017–2018, to the consternation of her Western supporters, who sponsored the 2015 ceasefire (see Myat 2019; Lubina 2021).

Much has been written about whether Aung San Suu Kyi could have “done something” to protect the Rohingya in 2017–2018. But that is beside the point, at least from the perspective of this book about Burmanization. Aung San Suu Kyi was not making decisions in a vacuum but in the context of supporters who were indoctrinated for over 50 years of Ne Win’s Burmanization ideology. To understand how this happened, it is necessary to go back and understand where Ne Win and Ne Winism came from, and why and how his government “Burmanized” vast sectors of what is what is Myanmar. In doing so, he created enduring institutions that today present the context in which any peace will be negotiated.

2.8 THE DIRECTORATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE: HABITUS, THYMOS, ISOTHYMIA, AND MEGALOTHYMIA

The original bureaucratic source of the Burmanization politics that afflict Myanmar today are The Directorate of Psychological Warfare, founded under the U Nu government in the mid-1950s but coordinated by Ne Win’s supporters with counterinsurgency lessons learned from the Israelis, Yugoslavs, and American CIA. The Directorate sought to prepare the population for a habitus that emphasized the primacy of the military, hierarchy, and the legitimacy of violence.

The underpinnings for this were to be found in how Burmese history was framed. Burmese school history, is the story of the military and justifies how ancient rulers expanded their empires (See Gervais and Metro 2012; and South and Lall 2016). The promotion of Burmese colonialism is based on this understanding. Thus, “*Thaung Gyan Thu*,” is the label for “insurgent.” This name was given to ethnic armed organizations and continues to be so. The Burmese expression “*Thaung Gyan Thu*” refers to a group with no moral foundation that uses guns to control others arbitrarily. In the mind of the military, this can only be the ethnic insurgents who challenge the *Tatmadaw*. It cannot by definition be the *Tatmadaw* who, after all, are the heirs of great kings. Colonel San Pwint (2016), a member of the military peace team in the 1990s, wrote about his memories of the peace process. Many of the retired military officers’ memoirs expressed feelings about ethnic armed groups, only using the

dysphemistic term “guerrilla” in their writing reflecting their own assumptions of righteous dominance or what Fukuyama (2019) in his recent book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* called megalothymia (see as an example Pwint 2016: 12–13), which is about a Greek concept which is about the need to be recognized by a superior as exceptional. The problem with megalothymia is that for every individual recognized as exceptional, many more are perceived as inferior and receive no public recognition of their human worth. During the second half of the twentieth century, this would become the Rohingya in particular, and ethnics in general.

For Fukuyama, megalothymia is rooted in the Greek concept of Thymos which is about the spiritedness of identity, and isothymia which is about the demand by formerly oppressed people to be recognized for what they are. Or as Fukuyama put it, when isothymia seeks equality and megalothymia seeks recognition as superior, thymos seeks recognition (Pwint 2016: 18–23). Such concepts of superiority emerged from Ne Win's ideology which stressed the central authority of the military.

The army generals who continued the Ne Win legacy in Burma consistently positioned themselves as cosmically superior and insisted that their enemies recognize them as the only legitimate rulers of Myanmar. The superiority of the *Tatmadaw* was even assumed in the NCA which called for the disarmament of the Ethnic Armed Organizations, but not the *Tatmadaw*. The generals believed that being superior meant being the power holder or decision-maker, and as described below, was rooted in the sacred Buddhist *Barami* inherited from virtuous previous lives. The desire for political equality motivating ethnic armed organizations' attempts to engage in political dialogue was inconsistent with the *habitus* of this world view.

2.9 TALKS OF PEACE

Saw Eh Htoo still was an optimistic man, and shared this optimism with others. Eh Htoo wrote that obviously, the military dominance highlighted in the military-centric textbooks is not the only narrative available in Myanmar today. There are also stories about peace among the people, but conflict narratives were unaffected by these peace narratives. Dagon Taryar (1919–2013) was a student leader in the British times and spent 39 months in Ne Win's prisons after the 1962 coup. He wrote the following in 2006:

There are no enemies or friends in my life. If I say I have no enemies or friends, some people may be offended. Peace should be achieved, in my opinion, through peaceful means. Ordinary Burmese people understand that we can't do anything without peace. (2006: 109–110)

Taryar was a Burmese who dedicated his life to making Burma a more peaceful place. In addition, his story reflected the majority's point of view. Civil war, dictatorship, and poverty have all been part of the Burmese experience. All of these factors play a role in the lack of peace.

In his memoir, the Mon ethnic leader Nai Ngwe Thein expressed his political views as follows:

The path to a federal state is linked to peace. We must put an end to the civil war and bring peace to the country. When it comes to political issues, our problem-solving should be based on democracy and equality. In Burma, the use of arms to solve problems has stifled the development of the state and our people. The achievement of peace is critical.

In Nai Ngwe Thein's comment, there is an unquenchable thirst for democracy and peace. He was a powerful Mon politician and rebel, but he worked for peace in his later years. Even though he was the leader of the Mon army, he knew how to best resolve the conflict. His words were intended to bring Burma peace.

According to Thomas Thangnou a Chin revolutionary who was recently engaged in talks with the government,

The political strategy is the most effective way to address ethnic tensions and the decline of democracy. Burmese politicians have relied on armed conflict to resolve political issues since independence. As a result, our society has become entangled in a vicious cycle of hostility, distrust, and misunderstanding. Another consequence is that the best option for dealing with the Burmese situation is a political solution.

During the Civil War, as a Chin revolutionary he was involved in numerous acts of violence, only later admitted that the most peaceful path was the best. His words and deeds reflected the realities of how the post-2011 peace process played out. The Chin leader believed nonviolent means were the only way to achieve peace.

According to U Aye Thar Aung, a Rakhine ethnic leader, trust-building, partnerships, and political discussion are the only ways to end

the civil war. He had spent more than a decade in prison as a political prisoner. When he was elected vice-chair of the House of Representatives, he stated that the failure of the peace process was due to the use of military force in Burma. A Shan political party leader, Sai Nyunt Lwin, stated that they could if someone wanted to establish a peaceful route. We require a leader who is concerned about the country and recognizes the value of peace. He brought Burma's reality to light.²⁰

Ne Win ironically tried to do this through his Directorate of Psychological Warfare. When this didn't work, the *habitus* of violent means, which in the Myanmar military means Four Cuts anti-insurgency taken from the military playbook.

Still peace is deep within Myanmar's varied cultures. But conquering hostility, mistrust, and misunderstanding is difficult, and really a matter of the heart, reflected in the arrogance that has trapped the *Tatmadaw* into "Taking up the Burmese Burden," just as the British took up the White Man's Burden, and then encouraged their American cousins to do likewise, are also matters of the heart. The peace narrative needs to recognize how deeply this is embedded in the *habitus* of Myanmar's military-centric culture.

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²⁰ See Sai Nyunt Lwin (2019). Speech by Sai Nyunt Lwin, Vice-Chairperson (1) of Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, at 4th Session of Union Peace Conference—21st Century Panglong. <https://www.mdn.gov.mm/en/speech-sai-nyunt-lwin-vice-chairperson-1-shan-nationalities-league-democracy4th-session-union>. Accessed June 16, 2023.

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The Historical Origins of Burmanization

Chapters 3–7 are about the origins in accounts of Burmese history, and the consequences of these accounts for how the nation was Burmanized. This began at the time of independence, but did not couple itself with military authoritarianism, until after the coup of 1962. Burmanization became a *de facto* policy under military rule from 1962–2016, and remained even during the brief period after 2012 or so when there was a liberal opening of the country, which was ultimately shut down with the coup of February 1, 2021.

Central to these chapters is how history and Buddhism were used to legitimate a disciplined military rule, in which there would be one culture, one economy, and one military. Narratives were created in a fashion that celebrated ethnic Bamar culture, and in which there was an assumption that the highlands people would be assimilated into that identity, while foreigners would be alienated and expelled.

Much of this was rooted in administrative assertions first made under British Indian rule in 1824–1942, and then during the extreme violence of World War II, which in turn led to the civil wars of Burma itself which began in the years immediately after independence, and have provided the context for both the violent politics of Myanmar, and the massive resistance to extremely authoritarian rule ever since.



Historical Narratives and Burmanization (1824–1947)

3.1 THE MULTIPLE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF BURMANIZATION

Every country has at least two historical narratives underpinning it. First and most public, there is the national narrative justifying what Anderson (1991) called the imagined community which is bounded in both in time, and by geography (see also Waters 2005). All countries today have an official history that weaves together pieces of the past to justify the present. The focus is on what is plausible given the memories of the people present—the elders who like Saw Eh Htoo’s grandfather told impressionable children about what they remember regarding their own lives, and the socio-political context they grew up in. The dramatic often plays a prominent role—which is why violence, war, and the military are important in official history. The miraculous can also be present, dramatic rescues, heroes who sacrifice for the greater good are also prominent in such national stories. Some of these heroes are mythologized in ways that may bother outsiders who claim that they are implausible to them. Or as is the case in Myanmar, ethnic heroes like the Karen Saw Bao U Gyi are ignored because the ethnic claims are inconsistent with the mythologized national histories. The main criteria for inclusion for a national history is that the narrative be first plausible to the population, and then also credible to elders, and reflect a creditability for the honored founders.

This chapter includes two approaches, which are somewhat mixed together. The first approach is about the history written by Ne Win's historians; it is the "official history," found in textbooks in Myanmar, or for that matter in Wikipedia. This history highlights credibly the greatness inherited from past Bamar kingdoms which have led to the natural conclusion that the *Tatmadaw* is the indispensable institution for the preservation of Myanmar's sovereignty today. According to the official history, this period started in 1044 a.d. with King Anawratha. It was disturbed for the first chaotic period from 1287 to 1510. From 1510 to 1885, there were two great dynasties, established by Kings Bayinnaung (1510) and Alaungpaya (1752) respectively. The dynasties of these two great kings collapsed with the intrusion of British colonial power in the brief period from 1885 to 1942, the catastrophic Japanese occupation of 1942–1945, and ended only with the return of the glorious *Tatmadaw* which emerged out of the tragedy of martyr's Aung San's violent death. His death is still remembered by elders alive today, including by his daughter Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Anyway, that is one approach. The second approach which takes up much of the middle part of the story is that of the social historians who are less concerned with political and military glory, and more so with the ebbs and flows of population movement, social ecology, theories of governance, and so forth. Anderson in (1983/1991) *Imagined Communities* writes in this tradition, as does James C. Scott (2009) in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*. A review of this perspective is in the middle part of this chapter.

The final part of the chapter reflects on how the histories were used to justify military power and legitimacy.

3.1.1 *The Royal History of Burma*

The story of Ne Win's Burmanization policies involves retelling at least two narratives. First, there is the official story of three main Bamar dynasties celebrated in the textbooks, and widely told as a story of triumph. This version is one of political and military triumph, and assumes that as the majority people of Myanmar, the Bamar are central (see e.g. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012: 25). This story points out accurately that there were great kingdoms in the past that approximated the boundaries of today's Myanmar, and these kingdoms were ruled by kings who were military (*Tatmadaw*) commanders themselves, and protected the country,

and maintained peace for hundreds of years. The Buddhist kings themselves were assumed to be *Bodhisata*, and of course were anointed with the *Barami* they inherited from past lives. The kingdoms failed only when weak kings emerged, and the royal army, the *Tatmadaw*, fragmented. The result was fragmentation of the Kingdom, and a sort of anarchy as kings from the periphery attacked the rightful Bamar heirs to the throne whose problem was that they themselves were weak.

Senior General Than Shwe the President of Burma, expressed his belief in the martial traditions of Myanmar when he said on Armed Forces Day in 2006

Our *Tatmadaw* should be a worthy heir to the traditions of the capable *Tatmadaws* established by noble kings Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya. (See Lintner 2023)

The story Senior General Than Shwe assumes that like other nations, the Burmese people are ancient and have a righteous claim to rule based on legitimate claims. It also ignores other claims, which in the case of Myanmar include the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Arakan, Chin, Mon, Rohingya, and others today in various stages of revolt against righteous rule from the Bamar center. To make this point, the Burmese military erects the statues of the three great kings throughout the country. The ancient claims by military men for righteous military might are rooted in their capacity for war—today’s ruling generals look back and find warrior kings, who subdued populations, and seek to emulate them. Only when these kings were weak, they reason, did the country fall apart, and foreign invaders arrive to victimize the Bamar people. The narrative is righteous and plausible for Bamar who remember the catastrophe of British and Japanese occupation. The problem they write was that the King in Mandalay was weak.

A problem in Myanmar of course is that other groups like the Karen and Mon also assert a righteousness claiming plausibly that they are the indigenous first arrivals, with special connections to religion, linguistic uniqueness, and war. Each such group has access to written, oral, and even archaeological evidence needed to legitimate such claims plausibly.

3.1.2 *The Three Great Dynasties Approach to Burma's History*

Ne Win and his historians did not create the three great dynasties narrative themselves. The Three Dynasties approach to Burmese history probably had its origin in the scholarship of J. S. Furnival, a British official who worked for the Indian Colonial Service in Burma from 1902 to 1931. While in the colonial service, he founded the Burmese Research Society (BRS) in 1906, which began to document the ancient history of Britain's new colony by studying inscriptions, royal chronicles, languages, literature, archaeology, and other fragmentary resources.¹ He did this by creating a concept of a "plural society," a concept developed first for Dutch Indonesia, but then applied to Burma. Boshier (2018: 80) writes that he did this by assuming "essentialist" categories of race, ethnicity, and identity, as indeed the *Tatmadaw* still does even today. By doing this, Furnival and the BRS shaped the dynastic, linguistic, and military history in a fashion that explained Britain's civilizing role in Burma. Inadvertently, perhaps, he also provided the pieces of a narrative that could be fashioned into a plausible nationalist history after independence. Citing a British-era textbook, Gervais and Metro showed how this was used to justify the British conquest:

The English conquest came not to destroy but to fulfill. Racial character cannot develop so long as government is unstable Thrice they achieved a measure of unity [Anawratha, Bayinnaung, Alaungpaya]. [But] it was seldom a true unity, for whenever it was more than nominal it was maintained by means so terrible that they destroyed the end; and it seldom lasted for the bond was purely dynastic and broke thrice. (Gervais and Metro 2012: 32 citing Harvey 1926: 185)

The "Three Dynasties" approach to Burmese history was adapted from writers like Furnival who in turn adapted it from earlier Chronicles which underpinned the dynasties of the upper Irrawaddy River drainage in the area just south of today's Mandalay. For roughly 500–800 years, powerful kings from capitals near Mandalay subjugated vast areas via tributary relationships. The history Furnival framed provided historical legitimacy

¹ British colonial authorities threatened to shut down the new Burmese Research Society if economics or politics were addressed. Carol Boshier (2018) has written an excellent book describing the circumstances under which Furnivall and others were permitted to "practice history" in British Burma.

first for British rule. But after 1948 Furnival's account was adapted by the newly independent Burmese government of the Bamar-dominated AFPFL by focusing on the victories of three dynasties which plausibly were Bamar, and blamed defeats and disorder during the interregnums on perfidious outsiders (like the British), and the weakness on the kinglets who arose on the borders. An even more forceful a Bamar narrative by the Psychological Warfare Directorate starting in the 1950s, which created in the 1950s and then adapted by the post-1962 Ne Win government which had named its own national army after the forces fielded by the King (see Boshier 2018; Gervais and Metro 2012).²

The three dynasties were King Anawratha's Pagan (1044–1287), King Bayinnaung's Toungoo (1510–1752), and King Alaungpaya's Konbaung (1752–1885). The new Burmese books were historically grounded and analytical, just like the British were. Both also provided a credible and creditable explanation for why the Tatmadaw were the natural heirs and protectors of Burmese sovereignty after 1948.

But the endurance of these accounts is also a direct product of the Burmanization policies of the 1960s, which spread textbooks, film,³ and later the television of Ne Win's government broadcast into the countryside. The accounts are today found in textbooks, Wikipedia, and memorialized in museums as an ideology that assumes nation, Buddhism, and the military are central. The dynasties are assumed to be Burmese Buddhists, Burmese linguistically and culturally, have strong militaries, and occupy the same territory as today's Myanmar. The kings were known for their might, and the fact that their "territory" extended beyond what is now Burma, and into parts of India, Thailand, Laos, and southern China.

Note too though, that there is an important difference with respect to how the interregnum between the Pagan and Toungoo (1287–1510) was framed. In the British texts, it was the lack of "true unity," but for Ne Win's schools this would be the time when non-Bamar took over, creating

² Today, this nationalist rendering of Myanmar history, which puts the majority Bamar at the center, is found in widely read histories of Myanmar, including those by Taylor, Myint-U, Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin (2012), and others. It is also embedded in the English-language Wikipedia pages about Burmese history. But the story presented emerged squarely from the British traditions seeking to legitimize British colonial dominance.

³ See Ferguson (2007) for a description of how the Burmese film industry began before World War II, was developed after the war, and then co-opted by government censors, etc., to produce material focused on the righteousness of the *Tatmadaw's* pacification efforts.

chaos and suffering, all because the Bamar king was weak. The area that is now Myanmar subject to foreign invasion, and disintegration, conditions they argued, re-occurred after independence, and continue today.

As the times when the three dynasties were intact, Ne Win's historians pointed out that the map of the three Burmese Dynasties was roughly the same, or even larger, than today, there were multiple military victories, and the kingdoms dominated the region, receiving tribute from the highlands and beyond. The rice fields were abundant, and the glory of the Buddhist kings and their royal military ensured good lives for the people. The period of disorder began with the arrival of Mongol invaders in 1287 which precipitated the fall of Pagan in 1297. Among the policies emerging from the destruction were those of Ava, Mrauk U, Shan States, and Hanthawaddy, which seem to the modern *Tatmadaw* to be what modern-day EAOs are establishing today. Shifting alliances resulted in a constant war which ended, only when the Toungoo Dynasty emerged to unify the upper Irrawaddy Valley in 1510, and founded what would become for a time the largest Empire in Southeast Asia. Deterioration resulted in the emergence of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1752, which then marched across Southeast Asia, re-unifying the Burma Kingdom in 1752, conquering Rakhine, and Ayutthaya (Siam). This ended in 1824 when the expanding British East India Company first invaded.

The Burmanized history continues with the catastrophe of the three Anglo-Burmese wars (1823–1825, 1854–1855, and 1884–1886), and the ultimate exile of the Konbaung King Mindon to India in 1885. The occupying Indo-British forces were for Ne Win's historians yet another catastrophe, a result of weakness on the part of squabbling Konbaung rulers. The result was a loss of control over the economy, restrictions placed on the practice of Buddhism, and the rapid expansion of British Christian missions in the highlands. This was quickly followed by the even larger catastrophe of World War II, in which British Burma was a battleground for Japanese, British, Chinese, and American armies. The only thing rescuing Burma at that time, according to the new narrative, was the reborn Burma Independence Army (BIA) of General Aung San, which invaded Burma with the Japanese in 1942, negotiated peace with first the Japanese, then the British, before again forcing the British to announce independence in 1948. This in turn was the basis for independence on January 4, 1948, a date kept even after the revered General Aung San was assassinated in this telling, the British of course tried to double-cross the

Burmese by attempting re-colonization, but through the skills of General Aung San and the unity of the Burmese people led by the army, independence was scheduled for January 4, 1948, a date which even held after what were believed to be British agents assassinated Aung San and his new cabinet in July 1947.⁴

3.2 A SOCIAL HISTORY: PRE-INDEPENDENCE, CONQUEST, AND BRITISH COLONIALISM

But there is another form of narrative to tell about Burma, the idea that as Benedict Anderson (1983/1991) wrote: National identity is in fact new, even though it is usually rooted in righteous assertions about ancientness. Anderson and other writers point out that today's claims of national identity are in fact relatively recent, and simply project backward contemporary claims of legitimacy, claims that would probably be unrecognizable to the people who actually lived at that time. The national identity they write is a new form of identity, replacing older claims rooted in dynastic realms, religious spheres, geography, professions, and a variety of other salient categories.

National armies like the *Tatmadaw*, by this reasoning, are relatively new. As Anderson points out, an army that is loyal to a modern nation is different than one loyal to a feudal leader. Armies were traditionally loyal to nobility, and/or fought in the name of a god or an earthly prince, rather than a national identity with fixed boundaries. This was the case, Anderson points out in places as diverse as Italy, France, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Nation and government/state were not joined until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “nation-states,” and typically emerged in concert with what Anderson describes as “print capitalism”

⁴ The above paragraphs are so taken for granted, that it was written largely with the help of the world's most taken-for-granted source of information, Wikipedia. It is also a history found though in academic histories written by Taylor (2009), Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin (2012), and Myint-U (2021) who each write excellent histories of Myanmar from this perspective. The Three Dynasty approach is also implicit to Scott's 2009 *Seeing Like a State*. Such histories by and large assume away alternative narratives written from the perspective of ethnic groups. In this vacuum, Karen, Shan, and Mon histories are emerging in the school systems of the liberated areas of these groups. There are also excellent social histories of Karen, Mon, and others emerging (see e.g. Alwyn 2021 (Karen), South 2003 (Mon), Ferguson 2021 (Shan), etc. Leach 1964) wrote an anthropological classic about politics and ethnicity in the Shan/Kachin highlands.

and literacy. Rather than nations, there were dynasties which ruled, and peasantries paid tribute to groups that were able to extend threats, and/or offered protection. Various forms of such feudalism rooted in settled agriculture were found across Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas.

“Burmese” or Bamar identity in the modern sense probably first emerged, in the context of British colonialism, and the conquest and eventual exile of the Konbaung Kings to India in 1885. The British then divided the country into “ethnicities” based on bureaucratic census categories. British ethnographers and census takers assigned to different “tribes.” They did this primarily based on language classification schemes, and an assumption that this corresponded with territorial boundaries, a “prince,” and a census category (see Ferguson 2015; Scott 2009; Winichakul, Thongchai 1994). Generally, the classification system indicated that 70% or so of the population was lowland Burmese Buddhist, and the other 30% was a variety of other categories rooted in linguistics, place of residence, and religion.

To facilitate administration, the British divided groups into “tribes” or “ethnicities,” to whom were assigned an administrator, boundaries, and a responsibility to manage natural resources. In the populous center of the country, there was “direct rule” by British officers and their Indian subalterns from the British Indian Civil Service, who replaced the exiled court officials from Mandalay. The British imported tax collectors, police officers, jailers, military officers, health officers, and surveyors from their older Indian colony.

However, in the highlands, locally identified traditional leaders were anointed as “princes” by the British and permitted to govern in the context of British supervision. In particular, the British allied princes were granted rights to license teak, gem mining, and pay minor royalties to the British raj. Unlike with the lowland Bamar which were ruled via Indian civil service with its police officers, judges, soldiers, and prisons the highlanders could administer their traditional justice.

Justification for the colonial enterprise was based in Great Britain’s own historical myth of dominance, as described in Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden.” British Burma’s history emerged in this context as justification for British rule using reasoning like that described in Kipling’s poem (see also Gervais and Metro 2012: 31). The British origin story, whether for the lowland Bamar, or the highland “tribes” stretched back to the presumed need for Queen Victoria as their protector.

As in many decolonized states, the new Union of Burma, gained independence, and needed to develop a new ancient national story which put their own ancestors at the center, and remove the colonizer as a plausible and just ruler. The righteous story needed to deal with the artificial boundaries, census categories, and trading regimes the British colonial power left behind. In essence, how would the new nationality “Burmese” be defined, and what rights and responsibilities would the new government have to protect this identity, and project its power?

3.2.1 *The Administration of British Burma*

The British launched three Anglo-Burma wars to occupy Burma during the nineteenth century. The first Anglo-Burmese war took place in Rakhine state (1824–1825) and resulted in British dominion over Rakhine itself, and Tenasserim in the west. The Second Anglo-Burman War was in 1852–1853, and lower Burma (including Rangoon) was occupied. The final occupation of upper Burma was in 1885 when the Konbaung Dynasty was defeated and exiled to British India. In 1885, the British replaced the feudal Burmese rule, with the Indian Civil Service. The legal system means of enforcement, and personnel were brought by the established Indian Civil Service to Burma, which governed Burma as a province of India until 1937–1938. Most importantly, for the British perhaps the goal of administration was the establishment and maintenance of markets that would integrate Burma into the world economy.

Philosopher/historian Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 71–72) wrote that from a Burmese perspective, the British were notable for their scrupulous observance of noninterference with the people’s lives and respect for property and commercial activity. The British also treated the colonized people as subject of the Queen, and not as the personal property of a local ruler, as the Burmese Konbaung Dynasty had assumed. He wrote that the Burmese people appreciated the British administration’s predictability, which they equated with excellence, even though they were not entirely reconciled with foreign administration which after all involved being told what to do by British and Indian officers. But from the perspective of the peasant, the relationship of the subject to the state did not change much. Individuals could still be called on to serve the bureaucracy as labor corvée and taxpayers, even as the arbitrariness of the Konbaung rule disappeared. Michael Aung-Thwin (1985) elegantly called this “order without

meaning,” which can perhaps be defined as administration without the meaning of a national identity.

Also, part of the British economic interest were economic and migration policies. Migration from other provinces of Britain’s Indian Empire was encouraged, particularly to Arakan/Rakhine which was the last province to be incorporated into Konbaung Burma in the 1780s, and the earliest part of modern Burma conquered by the British in 1825. Indian civil servants were imported to administer Britain’s new Burmese colony called on to develop rice exports. Also beginning in the 1820s the British imported Indian farmers from Bengal, particularly to Arakan. Other Indians arrived in Rangoon to organize the purchase and export of Burmese rice to India, particularly after the conquest of that region of Burma in 1854. The result was that the Indian clerks, police, artists, soldiers, and money lenders dominated commercially. These people reinforced British colonial administrative and economic goals; at independence in 1948, the British capital Rangoon had a population that was 50% Indian, along with large numbers of Chinese traders. Only a minority was Bamar-speaking. By this time too, Rakhine State had a long-established population of Muslim Rohingya, many of whom were descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants from Bengal.

3.2.2 *Direct Rule*

The application of British rule of law was not uniform throughout the new colony. In the central areas where the Konbaung were the strongest, royal retainers, military officers, and others who ran the kingdom were replaced with members of the Indian Civil Service who applied the laws and policies of India under a policy of “direct rule.” Meanwhile, in the remoter areas of the colony, local leaders who in the past were nominally subordinate to the Konbaung were permitted to manage their policies themselves, on the condition that British companies be granted licenses to exploit the teak and other natural resources. In these remoter areas, the British policies were for “Indirect Rule,” policies which granted local nobles more powers of government.

Finally, the British also changed the relationship between the government and the Buddhist sangha monkhood which had been subsidized by the Konbaung government. The British did not interfere with the Burmese Buddhist cultural norms and practices in Burma, but they ended the temple subsidies that the Burmese kings had provided. As Furnivall

(1948: 7) noted, this is because British colonial policy reflected primarily economic aims, not the religious interests of the royal dynasties.

Despite what Maung Maung Gyi wrote about how people appreciated British bureaucratic efficiency, the Burmese-speaking people of the former King's territories disliked the foreign rule whether by Indians or British. Sporadic revolts began in response to British policies soon after the conquest, with the earliest revolts organized monks who insisted that shoes be taken off in Buddhist temples, a regulation British personnel disobeyed. The Young Men's Buddhist Association took up the independence cause in the 1910s. Strikes also occurred by dissatisfied, port workers, students, and rural farmers in the 1930s. In this context, a nostalgia for the not-so-distant days of self-rule before 1885 emerged. Elders and monks who witnessed the humiliation of the exiled King Thibaw, began to identify values of "Burmeseness," in opposition first to the British, but also the Indian civil officers who were in charge of day-to-day regulation of society. This identification was rigidified by British administrative census requirements that every person in their colony identify as either Burmese, or tribal (see e.g. Anderson 1983: 164–170). James Scott (2009: 238–246) in particular tied this to an "ethnogenesis" seen across the British empire where British state-building became a "cosmopolitan ingathering" in which new identities emerged from the preexisting categories. Taylor (2009: 124–148) describes well how new class and ethnic formations emerged in the context of the rapid growth of Rangoon in particular in interaction with the Burmese-speaking hinterlands and the migration of workers into southern Burma in particular.

3.2.3 *Indirect Rule*

Preexisting divisions in Burma were rigidified by British colonial policies, starting with the ethnicization of first the Burmese, and then the "tribes." Meanwhile, "Burmese" young people already in the 1890s reacted with hostility to the British as colonial rulers. In reaction, the British refused to recruit the ethnic Bamar into their administration, preferring to import Indians who already understood their bureaucratic system. When it came to hiring locals, they sought out minorities like the Karen, Chin, and Kachin who shared the British distrust of the Bamar.

Large portions of the Karen, Chin, and Kachin were also particularly open to Christian missionaries who stood in opposition to the Bamar

Buddhists. Thus, most of Britain's colonial employees were from non-Burmese "tribes," especially the Karen, Kachin, and Chin. These non-Burmese were concentrated in the hill areas, and in the case of the Karen, in lowland areas near the Bay of Bengal, particularly around Bassein.

While promoting Karen and other minorities into the colonial service, the British also encouraged missionaries to spread the Christian gospel among Burma's people beginning in the early 1800s, including in areas ruled by the Konbaung Dynasty before 1885. Most of the missionaries were English-speaking from Great Britain and the United States, but also included local teachers like the Karen leader Dr. San C. Poe who were trained abroad and returned. The conversion process they offered is what must have attracted Saw Eh Htoo's own Karen great-grandparents in the late nineteenth century.

The Christian missions also provided material advantages to the newly baptized highlanders, including schooling in their own languages and English, health care from missionary doctors, and training for locals as nurses, medical assistants, and doctors. The ethnic people considered the missionaries their saviors of sorts, because they were freed from the Bamar oppressors, especially the enslavement, labor corvee, and other forced service to Bamar monarchs which they had long endured. Thus, the minorities were not hesitant to ally with the Indo-British administration. In exchange, the British appointed them to the police and low-level jobs.

3.3 BURMESE NATIONALIST NARRATIVES IN RESPONSE TO BRITISH COLONIALISM

The Burmese nationalism created by the new *Tatmadaw* remembered the ancient Burmese monarchical values as "our king, our palace, and our country," but one in which the King was no longer just head of a dynasty, but what Anderson might call "first among the Bamar" (see Anderson 1983/1991: 19–21). Anti-colonial sentiment among the Bamar quickly developed into a hate-oriented narrative focused on the British colonizers, and their allies (see Smith 1991: 48–50).

A major literary figure, the renowned Burmese sage was Thakin Kodaw Mine (1876–1965) emerged as a source of anti-British sentiment. His anti-British colonial novels and poems became the foundation for developing Burmese nationalism via literary devices. He created the concept "Thakin and Kyun," (master and slave) which referred to the British as people who enslaved the Burmese people. His point was that the

British considered the Burmese as their slave (Kyun). Thakin Kodaw Mine defined the Thakin (Master) in his book *Thakin Dika*. In this Burmese-language book, he defined Burmeseness, and its relationship to Burmese Buddhism, Culture, and Practices (Thakin Kodaw Mine 1965). Dr. Than Tun (2008: 11) emphasized that this restoration of the Burmese spirit included hatred of foreigners, particularly the Chinese and Indians.⁵

There were at least three social mobilizations among the ethnic Bamar which would be used in the post-1962 narrative to engineer political transition back to the days of the Burmese military monarchy. The first group were the monks who sought to protect their prerogatives from British domination which insisted that the government not support religious institutions, even while encouraging British and American Christian missions established churches in the highlands. Demonstrations in the 1890s were focused on the refusal of British colonizers to take off their shoes in the sacred areas of Burmese temples. Monks became a potent part of any Bamar-speaking coalition after World War II.

Second, there were urban student movements that grabbed onto modern ideas of governance and justice. These began in the 1920s, after the establishment of Rangoon University. Aung San, U Nu, and Ne Win all emerged from this milieu, and students still remain a source of idealism and discord in Myanmar. The urban student movements were soon associated with labor movements in 1930s Rangoon. Riots between 1930 and 1939 putting Burmese and Indian workers against each other. These urban movements formed the core of what would become the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), and its breakaway Burmese Communist Party after the World War II.

Students of course would be at the center of demonstrations repeatedly after the 1962 coup, most notably in 1988, and also in much more recent years.

Third, there were rural peasant rebellions such as that of the Saya San in the 1930s. In each stage, the protagonists involved in the revolt steered the course toward a new national identity “Burmese.” This also developed a nationalist spirit, which would challenge the dominant Burmese urban and military culture. The rural-based *tat* (pocket armies) have

⁵ “Until the End of the World” (Kabar Ma Kyay Bu) was used to rally demonstrators both in 1988, and 2021. The poem was set to the song “Dust in the Wind” by the American folk rock group “Kansas.” Thakin Kodaw Mine and Aung San were the two nationalist heroes mentioned in the song.

roots in such traditions, and continue today in the form of “People’s Defense Forces,” which have turned on the *Tatmadaw*, and the rulers from Naypyitaw.

How were these resentments expressed? Monks, students, peasants, and others all had their own motivations. Each began to generate grievances against British rule, and all would express new forms of Burmese nationalism.

3.3.1 *Monks*

Monks witnessed the deportation of King Thebaw from the palace in 1886. The monks had enjoyed funding and protection from the Konbaung Kings, who financed the construction and maintenance of temples. The monks sought to protect their prerogatives from British domination which insisted that the government not support religious institutions, in a context of a formal separation between religion and government. The British separation between church and state was seen as hypocritical by Buddhist nationalists who saw the British Raj encouraging British and American Christian missions to establish churches, schools and hospitals, particularly among formerly dominated minorities like the Karen, Kachin, and Chin.

The first demonstrations by monks were focused on the refusal of British colonizers to take off their shoes in the sacred areas of Burmese temples. Such demonstrations were typically peaceful, even as the British responded harshly with arrests, trials, and imprisonment. Later demonstrations would be organized by the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) which organized demonstrations and opposition to the British beginning in the 1910s (Sarkisyanz 1965: 128).

The Buddhist Sangha of course remains a strong political player in the twenty-first century. In 2007, the monks were at the forefront of the “Saffron Revolution” which would be an important factor in the establishment of the Constitution of 2008, and subsequent liberalization. Buddhist monks in the 2010s were also among the most nationalistic elements of Myanmar’s semi-democratic society, and in the interest of Bamar Buddhist nationalism, incited their parishioners against the Rohingya, and others they deemed as foreigners.

3.3.2 *Students and Urban Workers*

A second source of Burmese nationalism was the universities, which provided leadership of the resistance against the British, and the Japanese, and later led the country to independence. Before World War II, young students at Yangon University initiated demonstrations and boycotts against the University administrators, challenging the colonial policy on education. Out of this, a revolutionary spirit developed among the young nationalists who demanded state autonomy and political rights. They did this through institutions they created like the Dobama, and the Nagani (Red Dragon) Reading Group which published books in the Burmese language. Aung San, a charismatic student was the leader of this group, which called themselves the “Young Thakins” a reference to a British insistence on whites being addressed by a Burmese word that means roughly “master” and referred to the poetry of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing. Eventually, this led them to plot revolution against the British. These young student leaders studied Marxism, promoted Burmeseness and Buddhism, and ended up cooperating with Japanese fascists. Thus, national heroes such as Aung San admired Hitler and Mussolini in their writing (Aung San 2013: 55). But their basic goal though was to expel the British and restore the Burmese golden day.

3.3.3 *Peasant Rebellion*

A third origin of rebellion against the British came from the peasant countryside, and was led by local leaders such as Saya San. Saya San was a local politician, a monk, and eventually proclaimed himself King. He led a peasant rebellion in 1930–1932, which resulted in the death of at least 1300, the imprisonment of 6000, and the execution by hanging of 125 by the British, including Saya San. The arrests and imprisonments were undertaken by an army that included a majority of Karen and Indian soldiers, and a few ethnic Burmese. Bamar society remembers these deaths and executions, and it is a central part of the nationalist narrative today.

The focus of the rebellion was on British tax collections which had replaced traditional tributary payments. Traditional tribute payments meant that when harvests (or prices) failed, tribute payments declined proportionately; typically, payments were not in cash, but a fixed proportion of the rice harvest (see Herbert 1982).

Under the new British market system, cash tax assessments were fixed, and when the price of rice fell during the global Depression of the 1930s, tax rates remained the same both for the small farmers and for the landless laborers. Indian money lenders took advantage of the situation to make money off of the impoverished. Peasants in the Irrawaddy Delta and the rice growing areas north of Rangoon went into revolt, and Saya San led the peasant rebellion in 1930–1932 (see Taylor 2009: 199–200). This left the peasant population subdued later in the 1930s, but also primed to support the BIA when they invaded British Burma in early 1942.

The leadership of the peasant movement was steeped in Burmese Buddhist mysticism. Saya San himself was an alchemist, seeking potions to protect his troops, and the rebellion. In crowning himself King, he drew on the imagery of the Galon (a Phoenix representing the Burmese), and a Dragon (i.e. Great Britain).

Disorder in the restive colony resulted in the administrative separation of British Burma from India in 1938, so the Governor was then appointed from London, rather than Calcutta. Arrests were made in 1940 of intellectuals like future Presidents Ba Maw, and U Nu for plotting to overthrow the British government—they would be released only when the Japanese-BIA force invaded later in 1942. Aung San escaped the arrests, and already in China, where he would make contact with the Japanese.

3.4 WORLD WAR II AND THE EMERGENCE OF BAMAR IDENTITY AND HEGEMONY

Aung San was a student leader at the University and led the group to revolt against the British during his University days. His colleagues called themselves the Thakin group and explored a range of ideologies. Aung San himself was most closely aligned for a short time with the pro-communist ideology group. But there was also a pro-liberal group that worked together for independence. Aung San and others also admired and studied the fascist nation-building of Mussolini and Hitler, Communist revolutionaries, and American revolutionary traditions.

Aung San's first intention though was not ideological, but was to liberate Burma from British colonial rule, and in practice, he had little interest in the international politics, except as it would help his cause. Aung San and his colleagues also believed, particularly in the context of the arrests of leaders like Ba Maw and U Nu, that armed revolution was the only way to expel the British. In this context, Aung San left for China

hoping to contact the Communist Party there. But instead, he connected with the Japanese army in 1940, the most powerful army in Asia. The connection in 1941 led to military training in Japan for Aung San and the “Thirty Comrades.” On Hainan, the “Thirty Comrades” received the standard Japanese military basic training, plus instruction in command, combat, espionage, and guerilla warfare (Callahan 2003: 48).

Aung San and the “Thirty Comrades” were recruited by the Japanese Colonel Keiji Suzuki to train for a liberation army. After a short training period, Aung San was appointed leader of a patriotic force, later known as Burma Independent Army (BIA) (Tun Zaw Htay 2017: 19–20). The Japanese smuggled them back to the border via Thailand in 1942 and then marched into Burma with three military columns of the Japanese army via the border crossing and Kanchanaburi, Thailand. The BIA force massacred civilians on their way back into Burma, especially in the HpaHpun area where many Karen (Kayin) were living. Perhaps another 1800 were massacred in the Irrawaddy River Delta near Myaungmung (Callahan 2003: 75). This was to have long-term consequences because it meant that the Karen population was suspicious of both the Japanese, as well as the thirty Bamar comrades and their Burmese speaking force. Many Karen remember this.

After reaching Burma, General Aung San and his Japanese counterpart recruited many young Bamar-speaking men to join the BIA to oppose the British. In this way, the BIA became an ethnically based army. The BIA accompanied the Japanese troops that drove the British from Burma in 1942. As a reward, the BIA was allowed by the Japanese to set up a puppet government, and expand the army, which quickly became the most important institution in the country. By 1943, an officer training school was established in Mingaladon north of Rangoon, where Japanese officers trained soldiers selected by General Ne Win, and President Ba Maw. Candidates were selected for “mental toughness” which reflected both physical toughness, but also the capacity to kill and commit atrocities when ordered to do so. The process also assessed loyalty to the BIA, effectively eliminating ethnic soldiers because so many of the Burma Rifles had remained with the British, and retreated with them to India. Communists were also not considered, despite an uneasy alliance begun at the beginning of the war. Harsh Japanese training methods were introduced. The result was an extremely cohesive officer corps, well-trained in fighting, mental toughness, and Japanese discipline (Callahan 2003: 58–63).

As for the British, the army retreated to India with military units they had formed, including the Karen Rifles, Chin Rifles, Gurkha Rifles, Kachin Rifles, and the few ethnic Bamar soldiers who fought with the British.⁶ In this way the older ethnic antagonisms of the colonial era were further rigidified.

Already in 1944, it was apparent that the Japanese were not going to grant the puppet government the authority over the country the BIA had fought for. The alliance between the BIA and the Japanese occupation army began to deteriorate. By 1944, Aung San and his war cabinet were plotting to expel the Japanese from Burma because the Japanese did not give them the independence they expected. In this context, the BIA sought alliance with the British-commanded colonial troops then in India to drive the Japanese from Burma's soil (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012: 235–238).

The BIA switched sides, in an uneasy alliance was made with units composed of ethnic minorities, including the three ethnic regiments allied with the British.⁷ As for the reconstituted Burmese National Government, a secret agreement led the former BIA units to switch sides, and join the British invasion of India on March 27, 1945.

The BIA at this time began was already associated closely with Bamar ethnicity, and instituted policies to keep the command “pure.” The de facto language was Burmese, and not English, and Japanese was used in military training exercises. As Burmese soil was turned into a battlefield, every young person was connected to an armed organization (South, 2008: 22–27). Thus, post-independent Burma would stand on a fragile stage because of many armed groups who kept their arms to protect their own self-defined people group.

⁶ The Bamar nationalists pointed out that non-Bamar ethnics taking the side of the British were disloyal to Burma, a success for the British divide and rule method of colonial rule.

⁷ The three formal regiments were the Chin, Kachin, and Karen which were designated as “King's Rifles.” Gurkha, Hindi, and Muslim minorities also tended to support the British against the Japanese and BIA after 1942. When the British were defeated, these regiments were withdrawn to British India, though a number of irregular Karen and Kachin in particular remained behind, and provided forward assistance when the British and American OSS re-conquered Burma in 1944–1945.

3.5 REBELLION, INDEPENDENCE, AND MORE REBELLIONS

The British, including their units of the King's Burma Rifles, invaded Burma from India in March 1945, driving out the Japanese in cooperation with the BIA. As for Burma itself, it collapsed into a sort of anarchy, with many small units of pocket armies (*tat*) briefly emerging to fight back against occupiers (Callahan 2003: 82–85).

Aung San's party was renamed the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, in a nod to the anti-Japanese sentiments. The British, along with their allies among the Karen, Kachin, and Chin units were back in Burma in mid-1945, and by the end of 1945 were reinstalling the British government over the objections of General Aung San. But Aung San by then commanded an independent army of several hundred thousand troops, and led the AFPFL. As a compromise, in 1946, Aung San was appointed Premier of British Burma, as the country prepared for independence which was scheduled for January 4, 1948. In the meantime, on July 19, 1947, Premier Aung San along with his cabinet were assassinated (Callahan 2003: 87–113).

But broader issues in South Asia also drove British policy, which was focused on a need to withdraw not only from Burma, but also its massive Indian colony, and Ceylon/Sri Lanka. India and Pakistan (East and West) were granted independence following pressure from Gandhi and Nehru's Indian Congress Party, and Jinnah's Muslim League in August 1947, and Sri Lanka became independent on February 4, 1948.

Burma became independent on January 4, 1948. Unlike the other colonies, Burma cut all formal ties with Great Britain, did not join the British Commonwealth, and immediately sought to chart a neutral foreign policy. The victorious AFPFL had reason to be suspicious first of the British, But also their American allies, and the Indians who were remembered as the subalterns that subjugated Burma. Independent Burma was also wary of China which was then in the last stages of its own Civil War, and Thailand which had served as a base for the Japanese, and after World War II and which quickly became base for the American CIA clandestine operations in Burma and southern China after World War II.

3.5.1 *The Communist Rebellions*

After the 1930s Saya San peasant revolution in Burma, Marxist ideas spread among the young nationalists (Than Soe Naing 2018: 90), and Marxism was seen as a path to national liberation. Young nationalists, whether of a fascist, communist, or nationalist bent, studied Marxism with NaGaNi (Red Dragon) publisher. They translated Marxist texts into Burmese. The most outstanding Burmese Marxists included Thakhin Soe, and Thakin Than Tun, both of whom would become allies of Aung San. Thakin Nu, and Thakin Aung San were also on the Communist Party roster following its founding in 1939 (Win Tint Tun 2014: 33), and for a brief time in 1938, Aung San was General Secretary of the Communist Party of Burma.

The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) was the first threat to the post-independent government in Burma, particularly in the north where they captured territory after the end of World War II, and in the months after independence in 1948. This happened even though, the Communist Party had deep roots in the independence movement. However, the Communists viewed independence differently. The Communists viewed the war as focused on the elimination of capitalist exploitation from Burma, i.e. the people and firms who cooperated with the British, Chinese, and Indians to export rice, gas, teak, and other wealth, while the people remained poor. As for the AFPFL of Aung San and U Nu, they viewed Burma as being a wary international player which would remain engaged with the global marketplace.

In negotiations with the British, there was an uneasy alliance between the AFPFL and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Than Tun and Thakin Soe composed a manifesto for the Communist Party while imprisoned in Insein Prison by the British in 1940. Than Tun (1911–1968) advocated for an anti-fascist policy, and viewed both the Soviet Union and Great Britain as Allies. Minister of Labor in Baw Maw's 1943 government, Than Tun was deeply involved in moving away from the alliance with Japan.⁸

Following World War II, the Communist Party began to organize laborers in the city, and peasants in the countryside. This resulted in a classic tension, often found in Communist Party movements regarding how to relate (or not) to capitalism. What compromises could be made?

⁸ Than Tun is also married Aung San's sister-in-law and was Aung San Suu Kyi's uncle.

This tension featured in how the CPB evaluated the newly independent government, and in particular foreign relations.

The CPB was particularly effective in organizing workers just after the war, and general worker strikes in 1946–1948 both in the countryside and the cities. At the height of this agitation, Aung San expelled the CPB from the AFPFL (Tun 1994: 158–159). At that time, the party had peasant unions, which had one million paid members (see Lintner 1990: 9) and were organizing massive strikes, and was a competitor for power with the AFPFL.

Under pressure from the departing British government, and at odds with the AFPFL, the CPB fled to the highlands, organizing themselves into two Communist factions, Red Flag, and White Flag. The White Flags wanted to cooperate with the government as it moved toward independence, while the smaller red flag party wanted to take up arms against the new government. The new Minister of Home Affairs, U Kyaw Nyein framed the Communist Party as a threat and expelled them in a fashion that triggered the rebellion (Waters Tony 2005: 91–92). U Kyaw Nein claimed that the “Goshal Thesis” was a recipe for revolt and rebellion, even though after Goshal’s thesis,⁹ was not yet widely distributed (Lintner 1990: 12–13). In this context, the Communists began the first rebellion of what would become the Burmese civil war. The BCP were to remain the primary opponent of the Rangoon government until 1989.

3.5.2 *The Karen Rebellion*

The ethnic revolt of the Karen, are significant factor in Burma’s prolonged civil war. Karen ideology was not Communist, but nationalist. Before the British occupied Burma, the Burmese Kings with their city-states and empires, only controlled areas where their authority was established. The meaning of Burma for the Karen essentially meant “where the King living in Mandalay/Ava/Pagan rules in the Irrawaddy.”

⁹ Relevant at the time was the “Goshal Thesis,” a political analysis written by H. N. Goshal,” a Communist leader who analyzed Burma politics, which proposed that the British’s independence offer of 1948 was fake, because it did not require a break with capitalism. The Goshal thesis pointed out that the British left the economic and military chains of capitalism. The Communist leaders concluded that APFPL had compromised too much with capitalism. The only way out, they reasoned, was to annihilate the APFPL to restore genuine independence (see Lintner 1999: 2–5; Than Soe Naing 2018: 214).

The Karen and the Shan were identified as the largest minorities by the British census takers. The Shan were a highland group speaking a language similar to Thai who had arrived in the region about 1000 years ago, similar to the Burmese (Ferguson 2021: 3–8). When the Shan arrived there were a number of other groups there, of whom the Karen were numerous. Karen narratives recall that they arrived from the north in about 500 BC, and settled in the lowland and highland areas of what is now Burma. They spoke a language that was different from the later arriving Burmese. During their period of rule, the Burmese turned the Karen into a lower caste, and established forms of bondage in which the Karen were required to serve Konbaung nobles. Residentially, they were intermixed with Bamar-speaking people in the Irrawaddy Delta, and in the mountains along the Thai border.

The Karen people traditionally lived in both the lowlands and highlands. In places, there were concentrations of Karen, and in other places, they were interspersed with Bamar. Their experience of persecution by Burmese kings and their armies alienated the many Karen from Burmese rule and meant that a number of Karen leaders supported British annexation during the nineteenth century (see Alwyn 2021).¹⁰ Karen fled from the lowland Burmese kings repeatedly; memories of torture and murder by the Konbaung King's soldiers were legendary when the second Anglo-Burma war broke out in 1853 (Alwyn 2021). Karen fled to Yangon, which the British then governed in order to take refuge (Saw Win Bet 2018: 2). More recently, The Burma Independent Army (BIA) led by Aung San massacred the Karen people in Hpapun township and Myaungmya township during the Japanese invasion (Morrison 1946: 70–186). These atrocities led to doubt among Karen people that coexistence and “Union” with Burmese people was possible, and reinforced their affinities with the British.

A large minority of Karen were receptive to Christian missionaries who brought literacy, health care, and other benefits from Britain and the United States. In this context, Karen cultural institutions thrived. Literacy in the Skaw and Pwo dialects became widespread. Schools were established with support from the British government to teach Karen and English (see Thako and Waters 2023). Karen cultural institutions

¹⁰ Smeaton (1885) wrote a paternalistic, but early account of Karen affinity for the British rule. The Karen supported the British due to their fears of Burmese and Shan domination.

were established in Rangoon, and the British established offices for Karen Affairs. Karen churches and Buddhist temples thrived.

Beginning in the 1920s, the Karen moved into a favored role in the British Burma civil service, and much of the army became staffed by first Karen, and then other minorities, at the expense of the ethnic Burmese, whom the British excluded. Thus, Karen officers and soldiers were responsible for violently quashing the Saya San rebellion in the 1930s. The Karen-dominated King's Rifles units also supported the British when the Japanese attacked. A number of the units retreated with the British to India, while others stayed to organize resistance cells. Others were victims of massacres committed by Japanese and BIA troops. In exchange, the Karen believed that the British promised to grant independence to a Karenistan which would be independent of Burma.

When the first Burmese Constitution was written in 1947. The Constitution named the federal state the "Union of Burma", though it was not really a "Union." The Karen, Mon, and Rakhine did not have their own states (Than Soe Naing 2018: 212), and so were not invited to the Pang-long meetings led by Aung San to negotiate federalism. Only the Shan, Karenni, and Chin were permitted to do this. Massive Karen demonstrations began shortly after January 4, 1948, declaration of independence, calling for the establishment of an independent Karenistan.

The Karen objected to the nature of the new Burmese state, which was focused on Burmese identity, i.e. they resisted incipient Burmanization. In General Aung San's speech of 1947, he asserted that the non-Burmese groups had small populations and asserted they were incapable of managing their area anyway (Aung San Speech 2013: 441–462). He said that he might consider Mon and Rakhine to have their own states, but ignored the Karen. In the end, the Mon, and Rakhine demanded to have their state, but the AFPFL was not willing to extend independence to any of them, asserting that despite what the Constitution said, the Union could not be diminished. In this context, the Karen and Mon revolted in 1949. On January 31, 1949, the Karen National Union revolted, demanding

1. Surrender is out of the question
2. The recognition of the Karen country must be completed.
3. We shall retain our arms.
4. We shall decide our own political destiny.

3.5.3 *Other Revolts: Mon, Kachin, Etc.*

The Karen National Union (KNU) was the first ethnic armed organization that revolted against the central Burmese government. The conflict between the Karen and Burmese nationalists already started during the colonial period. Mon stood with other ethnic people and the British to drive out the Japanese from Burma, and after World War II, they united again to restore the Mon identity in Burma (South 2003). In 1948, Mon demanded the AFPFL recognize Bago district and Taninthary district as a Mon state (Nai Pan Tha 2014: 74), and formed, their Mon National Defense Organization (MNDO) in 1948 in Zar Tha Pyin village. Later, they allied with KNU (Nai Pan Tha 2014: 103–120). In 1949, MNDO already controlled some areas (see South 2003: 99–108).

Meanwhile, in the north, there were two Kachin groups, one was cooperating with the APFL government, and the other was the first Kachin armed leader known as Naw Hsai, who organized No. 1 Kachin Rifle and No. 3 Kachin Rifle for revolution (Win Tint Tun 2014: 125). These Kachin Rifles were assigned by the departing British to eliminate the Communist in the north, but then turned against the new AFPFL government.

Meanwhile, Shan leaders agreed to live with Burma proper under the 1947 constitution, which indeed included an “opt-out” after ten years clause for both the Shan States, and Karenni State. Chin, Kachin, and Arakan demands for autonomy were also recognized. Nevertheless, Karenni, Pa-O, and in the west Arakan ethnics would also raise pocket armies (*tat*) and initiate revolts in the years immediately after independence. More such self-defense *tat* emerged too in an anarchic region which would involve invasions by Chinese before and after the 1949 Chinese Revolution concluded (see Ferguson 2021: 14–15, 56–58).

3.6 THE LIFE AND DEATH OF PRIME MINISTER AUNG SAN

General Aung San was the undisputed leader of the Burmese (Bamar) independence movement at the end of World War II. He deftly created a path between the retreating Japanese, and British who were determined to re-colonize Burma from India. He did this by defying the British Governor-General Dornan-Smith, even offering to surrender and be put on trial for the murder of a Muslim headmaster he executed during World

War II. The test of wills was resolved in General Aung San's favor, when Dornan-Smith was removed by Governor General Admiral Mountbatten of British India in 1946. In this test of wills, Aung San won; Admiral Mountbatten replaced Dornan Smith with General Hubert Rance. Aung San was then appointed Prime Minister of British Burma, with the expectation that he would be elected as the first President of Burma following independence on January 4, 1948.

3.6.1 *Aung San as a Politician*

In the context of the victory of his army, General Aung San then stepped down to from the military to form the AFPFL and seek governmental power. He was appointed by British Admiral Mountbatten in September 1946, as the Premier of British Burma, and permitted to assemble a cabinet in preparation for independence. It was Mountbatten's hope that the appointment would lead to the quelling of the general strikes being promoted by the CPB. Aung San's APFPL government was confirmed in an election in April 1947 which many Karen and others boycotted. Aung San preached a model of government emphasizing the importance of a strong leader and "one nation, one state, one party, one leader."

As a measure of firmness, Aung San expelled the CPB from the APFPL. He used the metaphor of the Buddhist *Stupa*, of a society rooted broadly in society, but with a sharp peak representing the leader (see Zöllner and Ebbighausen 2018: 44–47).¹¹ One way of thinking of this is that he skillfully, took advantage of the accumulated charisma (*Barami*) that came with his successes as a student organizer in the late 1930s, Japanese military training in Hainan in 1941, invasion of Burma from Thailand in 1941–1942, his role as Ministry of Defense in the wartime State of Burma, and his deftness in switching sides from Japan to Britain at the end of the war.

The final hat trick for Aung San though, was to persuade the Shan princes, Chin Tribes, and Kachin that they should side with the Burmese in demanding independence from Great Britain. This he managed to do at a meeting in Panglong, Shan State, in February 1947 by promising

¹¹ This type of governance in Burma is discussed with respect to Burma by Zöllner and Ebbighausen (2018: 44–47) and Waters and Panyakom (2021). In these works are discussed Buddhist cultural concepts focused by *Barami*, *Stupa*, and centralized charismatic leadership.

future referenda for the Shan and Karenni, and federalism for the rest. Notably missing from the conference were representatives of the restive Karen, the popular Burmese Communist Party, and the Arakan peoples.

So, there were at least two major issues unresolved, as independence came close. The Karen boycotted the meeting, because they believed British promises made to Karen military officers that an independent Karenistan would be established in the western highlands, and much of the Irrawaddy Delta where there were substantial Karen populations. The second of course was the role of the Burmese Communist Party in the new state. These thorny questions were still unresolved when a former Prime Minister of British Burma (1940–1942), U Saw, organized the assassination of Aung San at a meeting of his cabinet on July 17, 1947. The AFPFL had to instantly reorganize following the deaths of not only Prime Minister Aung San, but also three of his cabinet ministers.

Appointed by the British Governor General as Prime Minister was the courtly U Nu, a AFPFL stalwart who had been a leader of the Thakin movement, imprisoned by the British in 1940, and then Foreign Minister in the war-time State of Burma that was allied with Japan. Deeply religious, U Nu also widely respected, he nevertheless did not bring the charisma to the Premiership that Aung San had. Aung San meanwhile joined the pantheon of great warrior kings, becoming an enlightened one in the AFPFL pantheon. The new Burmese chroniclers called him called him “the fourth legendary king who unified the country, after Anawratha, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya” (Zöllner and Ebbighausen 2018: 50).

And this was to have consequences almost immediately after U Nu was sworn in as Prime Minister of an independent Burma on January 4, 1948, and the Shan leader Sao Shwe Thaik was sworn into the ceremonial office of President. The British flag lowered in Rangoon. But Burma would again soon be at war.

3.6.2 *The Hagiography of Aung San*

This chapter started with noting that part of nation-building is the creation of a national narrative, in which one hero naturally leads to another, legitimating the claims of those in power. General Ne Win’s Ministry Defense in the 1950s, under military rule, took the philosophy created the Directorate of Psychological Warfare, and created the Bamar-centric history that would fit so well with the 1962 goals of Ne Win’s post-coup government.

Ignoring all others kings, they asserted that the ancient history of Myanmar started with King Alaungpaya, and extended until 1885 when the British conquered. The interregnums where the kings were weak, they claimed, led to challenges from the periphery. In this context, challenges from the Communist Party, Karen armies, and other rebels were a threat by the periphery to the center.

The martyred General Aung San was easily slipped into the pantheon of Bamar heroes by the new government, and his role would be highlighted for decades. After all, in his short career he managed to defeat both the British and Japanese and create a Burmese vision for a new Myanmar. He obviously possessed the *Barami* that was needed at the time to create a new nation. School children in independent Burma learned about his heroism and the outstanding leadership of the Thirty Comrades which of course included Ne Win, who would be presented as his heir. His picture was in every government office, and on the paper money, where every Burmese was reminded of Aung San's role in the rebirth of the great Burmese nation of first the civilian U Nu, and then Senior General Ne Win.

Aung San of course had much in his life to celebrate. The U Nu government in the 1950s issued banknotes with his picture, dressed in a civilian shirt. By the 1970s there was a new Burma in which General Ne Win and his soldiers were at the center. These bills were switched out and replaced with Aung San's picture in his military uniforms, both Japanese and Burmese. This is when students like Saw Eh Htoo were learning about the glories of the modern *Tatmadaw*, and the centrality of Ne Win and his military-dominated government in the interest of national security.

And of course, this is one reason why Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, herself the heir of *Barami*, grasped onto her role as an activist and politician so quickly and firmly in 1988 (Myat 2019). The crowds came to see her, and she announced that she had come to honor her father's memory as the founder of both the nation and the *Tatmadaw* itself. And so, what could the military do when she threatened their power as the guardian of the Burmese nation? The military worship of her father dissipated, and as Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012) wrote, the role of the three great kings was highlighted. Aung San's picture disappeared

from the currency in the 1990s in the 1990s after his daughter challenged her father's military heirs, and his role in the independence movement diminished but never disappeared. After all, there was still a *habitus* which placed Aung San's memory at the center of the nation, a memory that his daughter promoted, and so his picture again began to reappear on in government offices, and celebrations of nationalism. It even came to a point that in 2020, just before the 2021 coup, his picture again appeared on the 500 and 1000 kyat notes.

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Aung San, U Nu, and Ne Win Create a New Country (1948–1962)

General Aung San set in motion the trajectory of the new country with his negotiations, promises, and a vision. His assassination in July 1947, would mean that while his shadow would cast itself across the new country, others would be required to implement it. The two main figures until 1962 would be Aung San's successor as Prime Minister, his cerebral trusted advisor U Nu, and his successor as head of the *Tatmadaw*, the more volatile General Ne Win. These two would ride the tiger from independence until the final showdown in 1962, when General Ne Win would seize power in an early morning coup, and imprison U Nu, eliminating him from the political scene.

4.1 AUNG SAN, U NU, AND NE WIN CREATE A NEW COUNTRY, JANUARY 4, 1948–MARCH 1, 1962

The assassination of Aung San and his cabinet on July 17, 1947, just five months before independence, left a void at the top of the AFPFL party. Assassinated were not only Aung San but seven others, including cabinet ministers. The previous president of the country, U Saw, who had ruled under the final British government in 1940–1942, was accused of organizing the assassination and hanged on May 8, 1948. U Nu, the President of the Parliament, Deputy Party leader, and confidante of Aung San was called by the British Governor-General, and installed as the new

premier. Implicit to the assignment was the task of organizing the first government, which became formally independent on January 4, 1948.

U Nu was a close confidante of Aung San until his death, but quite different in ambition and temperament. U Nu was President of the Rangoon University students union in the early 1930s, and along with Aung San became a senior member of the *Dobama Asiayone* nationalist group, which led student opposition to British rule. U Nu was known for his writing in newspapers, books, and Buddhist practices. He had little interest in material wants and even took a vow of sexual abstinence in 1948 (Butwell 1963: 60). Unlike Aung San, he was not a military leader and had not been part of the “30 Comrades” who were trained by the Japanese in Hainan in late 1941. In fact, he was in a British prison at that time and was only released when the British abandoned Burma, at the time of the Japanese invasion.

During the time, Burma was nominally independent while under Japanese occupation (1943–1945) U Nu was appointed first Foreign Minister and later Information Minister. Unlike Aung San, he did not retreat in early 1945 into the alliance with the British, but remained in Rangoon and was nearly killed when British planes strafed his house.

4.1.1 *Prime Minister Aung San 1946–1948*

Aung San’s BIA allied itself with the British after March 1945. The British under acting Governor Dorman-Smith retreated to Shimla, India, with the King’s Rifles where they established a government in exile. This is the army that returned to Burma in 1945 to expel the Japanese and which General Aung San and his comrades allied themselves with, after abandoning their alliance with the Japanese. The Burmese expected to be rewarded with independence.

Instead, arrest warrants were issued by Dorman-Smith for those who collaborated with the Japanese-sponsored State of Burma, including General Aung San, Commander of the Army, General Ne Win, and other senior leaders after Rangoon was re-occupied on May 5, 1945. At that time, the British occupied Burma with the expectation that it would be a steppingstone on a long road to remove Japanese forces from Southeast Asia and China. There was little British interest in Burmese independence. Still, the precipitous surrender of Japan in August 1945 meant that issues of South Asian independence were brought forth quickly not only in Japanese-occupied Burma but also in the other British colonies of the

sub-content. At the Kandy (Ceylon) conference, the structure of a unified army in which the British Rifles who sat out the war in India would be a majority of the army, while Aung San's BIA veterans would be a minority. Officers would receive only temporary commissions, so there was not an expectation that the army could be their career (see Callahan 2003: 90–106).

Nevertheless, General Aung San in August 1946 was finally appointed Prime Minister of British Burma by the Governor-General of India, Admiral Mountbatten, with an expectation that he would become the first Prime Minister of independent unified Burma. It was from this perspective General Aung San would be able to move his country toward independence.

Irrespective of his previous writings and speeches emphasizing that Burma would be a state with one party and one strong leader, Aung San negotiated separation from Great Britain with an assumption that the new country would be a union of democratically ruled states. The Panglong Agreement, at least on paper, reproduced a semblance of the system inherited from the British of direct and indirect rule. Reflecting British practice, there was an assumption that there would be two levels of governance, with centralized rule in the Bamar-speaking lowlands where about 70% of the population lived, and some level of autonomy in the highlands.

A question unanswered was the role of the Karen, many of whom supported the British against the Japanese in World War II, and were believed by some to be the largest minority in the colony with 7–10% of the population. The Karen were also favored by the British during their brief period of colonial control, and Karen units dominated the Burma King's Rifles units created between the 1920s and independence, including during the suppression of the Saya San Rebellion in 1930–1932. Indeed, the Karen came to believe that they would have a separate Karenistan, and would not necessarily be part of the Burmese Union.

4.1.2 *Independence, January 4, 1948*

The assassination of Aung San was a shock to both the plans of the British and the AFPFL government, and the country headed quickly toward revolt. Even before independence, the Communist Party of Burma contested the AFPFL control over the government electorally and more important militarily by pushing south from their bases in the northern

Burma. Meanwhile, in the east, Mujahedin Muslim soldiers seized control of parts of Arakan (Rakhine), along the Indian/East Pakistan border.

The biggest threat though was from Karen. The Karen had established a sense of national identity in previous decades and operated their own schools, religious institutions, and sustained their own language (see Thako and Waters 2023). Seeking independence, the Karen turned out hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on January 28, 1948, just 24 days after independence. Unrest continued, and an attack by police on eight Karen Church on Christmas Eve, 1948, led to the deaths of 80–200 (Lintner 1999: 10). This led to the emergence of the Karen National Defense Organization which included units of the Karen National Army, and defecting Karen units of the *Tatmadaw* which mutinied to join the new organization. By early 1949, the Karen army was in the suburbs of Rangoon, and battle lines were drawn between them, and the rump government army commanded by General Ne Win. The Karen retreated only after supplies ran short following the Battle of Insein, which remains prominent in the memories of both the Karen nationalists and the *Tatmadaw*.

It was in this context that U Nu in a radio address on April 16, 1948, described the threat to his government as one rooted in ethnicity, anticipating in many ways the language of Burmanization that would be developed by Ne Win following the 1962 coup. Notably, as Cheesman (2016) writes, it is a very early use of the word *Taingyinthā*, which is usually translated awkwardly as “race,”¹ and implicitly makes reference to the great Kings of the past.

4.1.3 *Revolts: Communists and Chinese Nationalists in the North, Karen in the East, and Mujahadin in the West*

The government of U Nu and his new army commander General Ne Win controlled only the area around the capital of Rangoon in 1949–1950; the rest of the country was under the control of the Communist groups,

¹ U Nu wrote “Under no circumstances can we allow *Taingyinthā* unity to be destroyed. Shan, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Burman must be united. The great mass of *Taingyinthā* in the union must be united. Our Union of Burma cannot go back to the fragmented ‘everyman to his own chief’ way that we’ve been—apart from during the reigns of (kKngs) Anawrahta, Alaungphya, and Bayinnaung—through Burmese history” (U Nu 2013: 66, quoted in Cheesman 2016: 4).

Karen groups, Muslim mujaheddin, and various “pocket armies,”² seemingly slipping into a type of anarchy in which local ethnic identities became the basis for loyalties. In this context, General Ne Win reconstituted the Tatmadaw as a Burmese army, rooted in the traditions of the BIA, and suspicious of anyone associated with other political organizations. Ne Win inevitably connected to foreign invaders, a not difficult argument to make in a country used as a major battleground in World War II.

Into the Burmese maelstrom, the Chinese Civil War inserted itself in 1949–1950. On October 1, 1949, the Communist Party of China proclaimed the People’s Republic in Beijing. At that time, the Nationalist Armies began a mass retreat to Taiwan, and a smaller retreat into northern Burma, where they were supported by the United States CIA via bases in Thailand. In this context, diplomats made jokes about U Nu’s government being the “Rangoon Government,” because the capital was all they controlled.

In part due to an arms shipment from India received at the last minute, as well as Ne Win’s leadership, the U Nu government survived, and the over-extended Karen retreated into the highlands. U Nu’s government began negotiations to push back the other rebel groups, and in 1953, large numbers of Nationalist Chinese soldiers began to be repatriated to Taiwan by American-funded flights (see Lintner 2020: 4; Callahan 2003: 114–118; Paluch 2023: 73–88).

4.1.4 *Battle of Insein and the Restoration of the Rangoon Government*

The hero of the Bamar in the battles of 1949–1950 was to prove to be General Ne Win and his new *Tatmadaw* who pushed the over-stretched rebel forces out of the Burmese heartland and restarted the valuable rice trade through the port in Rangoon.

By the end of about 1950, U Nu and Ne Win consolidated somewhat their grip on the central part of the country. Informal ceasefires were used as both a technique for peace and a chance for combatants

² Pocket armies are small locally organized militia that emerges in Burma in times of trouble. The Burmese word for them is *Tat*. *Tat* were present in pre-colonial day, and today (2023) are called People’s Defense Forces (PDFs). Such pocket armies are described well in Callahan (2003).

to regroup and later restart the fighting. Still from the perspective of the Rangoon government and the international community, the situation seemed to improve. What did not improve though, were conditions in northern Burma. A type of anarchy emerged there, and along with it, a new opium trade that would take on global importance. Opium poppy production and the heroin labs needed to process the sap into heroin would find a convenient place to develop in a part of the world where no internationally recognized government worked very well.

The Karen KNDO made quick advances in the first part of 1950, pushing into the outskirts of Rangoon, capturing the suburb of Insein, and threatening to move into Rangoon also retreated. The Karen, though, were over-stretched logistically, while the rapidly expanding Tatmadaw was drafting more Bamar-speaking soldiers quickly and ultimately regrouping. The result was that by 1953, the Tatmadaw was the most powerful institution in the country. In this context, generals began to see themselves as “nation-builders” as well, given the legitimacy of their military victories (see Callahan 2003: 172–174).

4.1.5 New Win and the Tatmadaw as National Heroes

It was relatively straightforward for the military to present itself as the national savior, particularly following the retreat of the Karen from Rangoon, and the CPB back up into areas closer to the Chinese border. The lowlands, where the bulk of the Bamar population lived accepted the rule of the Rangoon government, and the army under General Ne Win was also able to readily make demands on the public purse, with the wars of the 1949–1953 fresh in imaginations.

The threat to Burma was made even more plausible by the continuing involvement of foreign military forces in Burma. Chinese Nationalists supported by the Americans from Thai and Taiwanese bases were the most obvious threat. The fact that they were interested in invading southern China brought the new People’s Republic of China into Burma. Which vacillated between supporting the CPB and sending their own troops into northern Burma. This would culminate in a full-scale Chinese incursion to evict the Nationalist troops by the People’s Liberation Army in 1960 which was conducted with the acquiescence of the U Nu government.

4.2 COLD WAR PLAY GROUND: FOREIGN THREATS, 1948–1962

Burma's new government and its military were wary of the Great Powers. Burma in the 1950s was a weak country, bordering China, India, and Thailand which was closely allied with the United States and had recent memories of World War II.

Indo-British rule, which ended only in 1948, was remembered as particularly harsh by the majority Bamar in the lowlands. The British government with its Indian subalterns dominated government, police, and economy between 1824 and 1940s when British Burma was used as a battlefield protecting British India from attack by Japan. Fighting between foreign armies of the Axis powers (Japan and Thailand), and the Allied powers (Great Britain, the United States, and China) resulted in 250,000–1 million dead, and millions more wounded and displaced in a population of 16 million. The victorious forces of Aung San's BIA, renamed *Tatmadaw*, itself felt betrayed by both the colonial power Great Britain, which pulled its troops out of Burma during the war to India, and also Japan with which it invaded Burma in 1942, but which reneged on promises of self-government for a freed colony.

In this complicated international context, Aung San, even before independence, was insisting on a neutral foreign policy. By 1947 it was clear that Burma would be the only British colony from South Asia refusing to join the British Commonwealth. Under U Nu, and in the context of the emerging Cold War, this policy would become one of strict neutrality between the United States, the US ally in Thailand, the Soviet Union and the Communist movement which soon included China on the northern border of Burma. On Burma's western border, the Dominion of India, and East Pakistan were still, from Burma's perspective closely tied to Great Britain, and Muslim East Pakistan was after 1948 on the border of the restive Rakhine region. Indeed, it was in this context that Burma was a key organizer in the 1955 Bandung conference, where non-alignment was closely tied to demands for decolonization in Africa and Asia.

Meanwhile, new challenges quickly appeared in the north of the country along the Chinese border. The Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) armies were being defeated by the ascendant Communist government, which captured Beijing in 1949, pushing out Chiang Kai-Shek's armies into Taiwan and northern Burma. The Chinese Nationalist army

in northern Burma would stay there for the next 20–30 years and would continue to be supported by Taiwan and the US CIA. Their superiors in Taiwan and their American sponsors had hopes that they could invade southern China from the bases in northern Burma where the KMT controlled territory, and were supplied from the US CIA bases in Thailand. This effort would of course be abjectly unsuccessful, but not before the descendants of the KMT established northern Burma as the largest source of the world's opium.

4.2.1 *U Nu's Neutral Foreign Policy*

By the time of independence, Aung San and his foreign affairs advisors had experience navigating between the British, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Americans. The Cold War of course was coming fast, and they wanted to avoid close alliance with either bloc.

This was one of several reasons that Burma opted out of the British Commonwealth. And while Aung San and his successors had general policies that were “socialist,” they also wanted to avoid alignment with the Soviets, or for that matter after the victory of China in 1949, the People's Republic of China.

As for the Americans, they were an ally of the British during World War II, and from the perspective of Burma, seemed to be positioning themselves as the new hegemonic power in the region. Even after granting the Philippines independence in 1946, the Americans maintained military bases there, and the CIA remained deeply involved in Philippine politics. The Americans also did not initially support Vietnamese independence from France, and in fact supported French hegemony in Indochina, before taking over the task of supporting the rightwing government in South Vietnam.

In this context, U Nu throughout the 1950s pursued an aggressively “neutralist” policy in foreign affairs. Burma was an organizer of the 1955 Bandung conference which sought to map out a neutralist position relative to the American and Soviet blocs for the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa. Indeed, Burma was so neutral that in 1961 Burma's Ambassador to the UN, U Thant, became Secretary General, with widespread support. U Thant remained the Secretary General for ten years, even after he lost the support of General Ne Win in the late 1960s. Indeed, Aung San and Ne Win's policy of neutrality between the hegemonic blocs is still maintained. Burma's balancing between the

great powers has at times been quite inartful, resulting in policy catastrophes including economic collapse during Ne Win's dictatorship, the confrontations following the 1990 elections, Hurricane Nargis in 2006, and the expulsion of the Rohingya in 2017. From the perspective of the Burmese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what is consistent is that interference from abroad is unacceptable; and Myanmar's governments continue to point to the fact that the country never suffered from Great Power machinations after World War II as did Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Bangladesh. This quest for neutrality has been the case for the U Nu government, military governments, and the brief time of the NLD government in 2016–2021.

4.2.2 *Modernizing the Military Under UNu*

The *Tatmadaw* emerged from the wars of 1949–1953 as the strongest institution in Burma. The cost of this happening though was an ever more isolated military, narrowly constructed by men who shared roots in the Thirty Comrades, Japanese military training, BIA, Aung San's AFPFL, and opposition to foreign interference whether from China or the United States. Gone were the ethnic officers, particularly the Karen, who mutinied in 1948–1950 to form the KNDO. Gone also was any pretense of an alliance with the Communist Party forces in the north. The *Tatmadaw* became more insular, Bamar-focused, and Buddhist. The test of battles with the Japanese, Karen Army, and BCP glued the survivors ever closer together, under the strict command of General Ne Win whose own military training began with the Japanese before and during World War II.

The former guerilla fighters were given liberal budgets to acquire weapons by Prime Minister U Nu. In the context of the Cold War, this was subsidized by competing superpowers from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China each of whom sought geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia, and indeed conducted proxy wars across the region in support of their Cold War goals. U Nu's government was acutely aware of the Communist insurgency in The Philippines, and the war between Communist-aligned North Vietnam and American-aligned South Vietnam. The generals controlling Thailand made a strategic decision to align with the anti-Communist Americans and permitted massive American Air and Naval facilities to be established in the 1960s and 1970s. Malaysia and Indonesia dealt with Communist insurgency in the

1950s and 1960s. Laos and Cambodia sought like Burma to walk a precariously neutral road and unsuccessfully avoided the catastrophes of insurgency and Communist domination, American carpet bombing (Laos), Khmer Rouge genocidal violence (Cambodia), or exceedingly violent revolution (Bangladesh).

In this context, the *Tatmadaw* acquired weapons, and also ideas regarding the pacification of highland groups and nation-building. As a nod to neutrality, among the biggest sources of weapons beginning in the 1950s were Yugoslavia and Israel. But military officers were courted around the world, Burmese officers receiving training in the military academies of the UK (Sandhurst), the United States (West Point), St. Cyr (France), and Dera Dun (India) (see Callahan 2003: 176–177). But for the purposes of understanding how Ne Win’s Burmese ideology is to emerge, it is not from the weapons purchases, but from what the officers learned about intelligence operations, particularly what was then called “psychological warfare” by which they meant the combination of propaganda and dirty tricks designed to manipulate populations to legitimate rule.

Maung Aung Myoe (2009) noted that the Tatmadaw sent many military delegations abroad to study military training programs and training policies. Delegations went to India, Pakistan, Israel, Yugoslavia, and European countries, reporting on how the different countries implemented military policy. Those returning from Yugoslavia described an ethnic integration between Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and others inside the army and defense industries there (Callahan 2003: 180), but were unable to convince Ne Win to adopt similar policies.

Psyop techniques meant that the military used a wide range of activities designed to legitimize rule. The American military developed such techniques to a high level in the Philippines, where Col. Edward Lansdale commissioned films, plays, and other entertainment designed to convince rural populations about the dangers of Hukbalahap rebels who were described as Communists, and the positive benefits of the American-sponsored government. Such programs were to be transferred to South Vietnam by Lansdale after the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954 (see Anderson 2020; Ferguson 2007; Waters 2022).

The Soviet Union, China, and other great powers had similar programs, the techniques perfected following the success of their

Communist Revolutions.³ Indeed, such techniques were initiated by Edward Bernays who first developed advertising campaigns in the United States to maintain support in World War I. These became more widely used in propaganda techniques in World War II which were perfected by the Hitler regime in Germany. In the United States, such techniques focused on both the domestic American population, and designed “PSY-OPS” programs to test the morale of the civilian populations in places like Japan and Germany. In this context, the Directorate of Psychological Warfare was established by the Burmese Ministry of Defense to capture the “hearts and minds” of a war-exhausted Buddhist Burmese-speaking peasantry.

U Nu in the 1950s commissioned a Directorate of Psychological Warfare directed by Colonel Maung Maung,⁴ one of Ne Win’s key military aides. What this meant was that the development of the unit came under direct military control, i.e. under the direct control of General Ne Win. In the mid-1950s he put loyalists, including both soldiers and academics, at what would become the base for the development of Burmanization ideology after 1962.

The intellectual collaborators assigned to the Psychological warfare department were U Chit Hlaing (also known as Ko Ko Maung Gyi); Major General Aung Gyi; and Dr. Maung Maung. This group began in the mid-1950s to formulate ideas. Their ideas would become the Burmese socialist narrative that would legitimate Ne Win’s regime after 1962, create the discipline he sought, and habituate the population to authoritarian practices. Their work was to be the basis for the curriculum Eh Htoo would be indoctrinated within the Burmese school system decades later.

³ To understand how common and taken for granted such “psychological warfare” directorates became, one only needs to look at the more or less transparent involvement of the US military at football games, and the manner the United States Navy cooperates with the “Top Gun” movie franchise. Such rituals in the United States and elsewhere are designed to raise the status of the military.

⁴ Two key aides of Ne Win were named Maung Maung. Colonel Maung Maung (1920–2009) served in the *Tatmadaw* with General Ne Win in the post-world War II wars. He was important in the 1962 coup. He fell out of favor with Ne Win, though, and was sent to serve abroad as Ambassador Extraordinaire with the Foreign Service. Professor Dr. Maung Maung (1925–1994) was an academic who was closely allied with the *Tatmadaw*, but never an officer. He eventually became Attorney General, Chief Justice, and for a month in 1988 was Prime Minister.

4.2.3 *The Directorate of Psychological Warfare and Ne Win's Historians*

Psychological warfare is central to military doctrine around the world. This involved a range of “white” and “black” operations and were developed first during World War I by Edward Bernays in the United States and others. Often the point of such PSYOPS is more sociological than psychological; it was to curry loyalty with a population to a particular regime. The white portions involve common propaganda which presents verifiable information in a fashion designed to generate an emotional commitment to the cause. Black operations are designed to deceive or terrorize an opponent in a fashion which would make them more vulnerable to military control. A well-developed historical account such as that created by Furnivall for the British Burma curriculum which put the British monarch at the center of the story is a “white operation,” and the post-independence adaptations made by U Nu and Ne Win’s Ministry of Education are examples. Such policies reorganized the historical narrative to put the military, Bamar people, language, and culture at the center.⁵

Such innovations in historical narratives legitimate rule by those powerful enough to create a school system, and the Burmese were to be no different. And at the Bureau of Psychological Warfare, Dr. Maung Maung was there to assist in the creation of a narrative that would logically lead to a conclusion that the *Tatmadaw* was the one indispensable institution.

As described in Chapter 2, Ne Win’s own historians started with the British historiography, re-arranging it in a new narrative emphasizing that Burmese-speaking population migrated to the Irrawaddy River Basin beginning in the tenth century, displacing the Hindu Pyu people, a group which built the pagodas of Pagan, but then disappeared from the historical record. This legitimated a history noting that King Anawratha, the

⁵ Such white operations were being made all over the rapidly decolonizing world. Benedict Anderson (1983/1991: 163–186) describes this process well, when he writes about the role of Maps, Censuses, and Museums in modern nation-building. Museums and histories in particular are obviously designed to make a population sympathetic to the central story. But so are assertions made about boundaries (maps) and classification of peoples (censuses). In Anderson’s chapter, he writes about the role that British map-makers played in defining the boundary of Thailand and British Burma, and the emergence of census categories in British Malaya. In the case of museum pieces, Anderson writes about the role that the Buddhist temple of Borobudur played in representing the new Islamic nation of Indonesia.

first king of the Pagan dynasty, was the first of the three military-based dynasties which was put at the center of Ne Win's new history (Boshier 2016). Emphasized too was Anawratha's role in bringing Buddhism to Burma.

The narrative was created with an eye to consolidating the nation behind a single plausible story that placed the Burmese-centric military in Rangoon at the center of twentieth-century Burmese politics; to do otherwise would have required the Tatmadaw to acknowledge the legitimacy of any number of the enemies they fought during World War II, such as the Karen, Kachin, Mon, Rakhine, etc., who had supported the British against the BIA in World War II, and since then gone into rebellion. The Directorate of Psychological Warfare was in effect taking on tasks normally associated with Education Ministries. But the Directorate was embedded in the military, the product would place the military at the center of society.

4.3 NE WIN'S FIRST GOVERNMENT, 1958–1960

The development of the new ideology though did not occur in a vacuum. Tensions between the civilian authorities under U Nu and the military authorities under Ne Win emerged by the mid-1950s. Even though the push to retake the country from the Burmese Communist Party and the Karen armies was successful by 1951, insurgencies remained in the highlands, both in the north along the Chinese border and the West where the Karen National Union regrouped along the Thai border. Chinese Nationalist forces from Taiwan were also active. Army moves to quell these insurgencies, and invasions were still controlled by the civilian Prime Minister and his advisors who kept an eye on army budgets. The position of U Nu was not helped by the fact that the quality of government services was crumbling under increased corruption by Civil Servants.⁶

In 1958, field military officers began plotting a coup, in which they would march on Rangoon and seize the government. Col. Maung Maung

⁶ Chao Tzang Yanghwe (1987: 98–99), a Shan leader believed that the insurgency was actually slowed down by the U Nu government which used a variety of both hard and soft power. He wrote that “By the mid-1950s, thanks to the support of the Shan, Kachin, and Chin, all immediate dangers to the AFPFL of U Nu had faced—the military strength of the leftist Communists and the Karen movement was losing steam and coherence after the death of its undisputed leader Saw Ba U Gyi (in 1950).”

and Col. Aung Gyi both had access to Prime Minister U Nu and negotiated an agreement with him that they hoped would both appease the restive army and prevent a formal battle. U Nu would hand over power to an interim government led by General Ne Win who was tasked with organizing a new election. In effect, it was a soft coup—violence was avoided, U Nu remained in the country and was permitted to reorganize the AFPFL for a future election (Callahan 2003: 186–190). This gave General Ne Win the chance to avoid supervision of their budgets by civilian authorities, and aggressively pacify the highlands where BCP armies with an orthodox Marxist ideology continued to roam.

After 1958, the military also took advantage of their political dominance, to increase military budgets, and expand aggressively into the government. Military officers from both the field and general staff were assigned to ministries to assert a military discipline over the government. Corrupt police and other officials were removed, and the garbage in Rangoon started to be collected. Propaganda from the Psychological War Directorate was also mass-produced, with printed material asserting the incompatibility of Buddhism and Communism the most prominent (Callahan 2003: 193–194).⁷ The press was also reigned in, and government critics arrested.

This taste of military dominance came to a quick end after the army miscalculated and agreed to elections in February 1960. The military officers, despite the clean-up of corruption, were not that popular, something survey research conducted by the Psychological Warfare Directorate itself warned about. The population viewed the military as haughty and arrogant. A “free and unfair” election was held in February 1960 in which the military and APFPL interfered (Callahan 2003: 196–197), but U Nu’s renamed Pyidaungsu Party won 158/252 seats, a clear majority.⁸

⁷ In the 1990s, Callahan (2003: 208) still saw posters in Yangon which she called “straight out of the Fort Bragg psychological war manuals of the 1950.” The slogans proclaimed things like “Down with the minions of colonialism” and “Crush all destructive elements.” Not elegant by the PSYOPS standards of the United States in Iraq perhaps, but still good enough for the still ruling *Tatmadaw* to use.

⁸ The military graciously accepted the defeat, returned to the barracks, and General Ne Win was awarded a Magsaysay Prize in 1960 for “maintaining democracy in Burma.” which he turned down on the grounds that he only did his duty. See <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-dictator-ne-win-won-asias-nobelprize.html> (Wei Aung Aung 2019). Other records indicate that his reasons for turning down the award was that the award committee had connections to the American CIA.

4.4 U NU'S SECOND GOVERNMENT, 1960–1962

When U Nu returned to office in 1960, he began dismantling many of the structures that General Ne Win introduced since 1958, freed the press, released government critics from prison, and brought more skepticism to military budgets. He was not completely successful though, and as the Commander in Chief of the army, Ne Win continued to reorganize the army, bringing it more closely under his direct command. This included a purge of army field commanders, and the reorganization of the command structure centralized into Rangoon, in the hands of General Ne Win. Ironically, the goal was to make coups more difficult, by limiting the autonomy of northern and southern commands (Callahan 2003: 201–202).

Likewise, within U Nu's Pyidaungsu Party, there was an emerging division between veterans from the days of the struggle against British colonialism (Thakin faction), and the young politicians emerging in the 1950s (U faction) who were trained in independent Burma. Paralysis in decision-making was the result.

Meanwhile, in 1961, there was a *Tatmadaw* offensive against remaining Chinese KMT forces who newly armed with US weapons, resumed raids from northern Burma into southern Yunnan in China. After the offensive foundered, U Nu encouraged the People's Liberation Army to retaliate, and the Nationalists finally were partially defeated, and an agreement negotiated to evacuate Nationalist troops from Burma to Taiwan. Taiwan and the United States did not fully implement the evacuation (the KMT forces would persist in northern Burma for another decade or so), but this was a minor victory at least in the establishment of a northern border with China.

The surprise victim in this effort was Ne Win's long-time adjutant Colonel Maung Maung, who was closely identified with the CIA and had recently accepted donations from the US Embassy for air conditioners, typewriters, and other equipment. Ne Win was apparently concerned that Colonel Maung Maung could be a CIA mole, and he was forced to resign from the army, from where he then entered the Burmese Foreign Service (see Callahan 2003: 198–199).

As for the Karen, during the parliamentary period (1948–1962) and Ne Win’s era (1962–1988), the battle between the government and the Karen continued (Win Tint Tun 2014: 356–359). Ne Win’s hostility toward ethnic armed organizations strengthened and a militarized stalemate re-emerged in the early 1960s. The military doctrine called “A Pyaut Taik Yey/ အပြတ်တတ်ကြမ်းရဲ (Total Elimination)” focused on the need for security and militarization.⁹ Military operations in the ethnic areas increased during the early days of Ne Win regime’s Burmanization efforts. Ne Win’s demand called only for total surrender.

And, of course, in response, the KNU demand asserted by Saw Ba U Gyi before his death was brought again to the forefront.

1. Surrender is out of the question
2. The recognition of the Karen country must be completed.
3. We shall retain our arms.
4. We shall decide our own political destiny.

The tensions between Burmese and Shan increased toward the end of the 1950s as well (Win Tint Tun 2014: 239). After General Ne Win’s 1958 “quiet” coup, Ne Win forced the Shan leaders to renounce their Sawbwa (principalities) and accept rulers appointed by the military from Rangoon. General Ne Win quietly compensated each of the Sawbwa with five million kyat each (Burma Currency), which in 1962 was the equivalent of USD\$1,050,001 at official exchange rates (Win Tint Tun 2014: 243).

The point was that even though U Nu won the election and returned to power, Ne Win set in motion actions which raised tensions in the highlands, which gave legitimacy to his own demands that an even harsher military crackdown was necessary.

4.5 THE 1962 COUP AND THE THREAT OF DIVISION

The escalating internal divisions within U Nu’s government and the concentration of military power in Ne Win’s hands was the immediate context for the coup of 1962, which was conducted with tanks. U Nu was imprisoned too. As for putative reasons for the coup, Ne Win pointed to

⁹ See Ministry of Defense, May Yu Special Issue for *Tatmadaw*, 1961, pp. 3–4.

the potential disintegration of the military not only due to the continuing occupation of northern Burma by KMT Chinese forces which the CIA funded, but also an especially a restive Shan State which was petitioning to have an independence referendum, as promised in the 1948 Constitution. In contrast to 1958, too, the army was bureaucratically unified, and under the command of Ne Win.

The 1962, Ne Win coup was much more aggressive and all-encompassing than the 1958. U Nu and senior officials were placed into protective detention for a period that would turn out to last years. Policies adopted by U Nu between 1960 and 1962 were reversed, and army officers began appearing again at ministries, placing the bureaucracy squarely under Ne Win's control. More money was pushed toward the military budgets, as it sought more weapons to contain internal rebellions, separatism, and external threats, all under the rubric of preserving the integrity of the borders inherited from British Burma in 1948.

It was in this context that the ascendant General Ne Win created a new party, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to manage politics. This brought out the philosophers from the Psychological War Directorate to create the plans that would become the Burmese Road to Socialism, a rather strange philosophy that would bring together an odd mix of Buddhist and Marxism.

4.6 THE NEED FOR A NEW HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF BURMA

Ne Win and his army by 1962 were fundamentally a Bamar Buddhist institution; few ethnic minorities were involved, and the army itself was drawing further into remote barracks and losing touch with the people. This is why it had lost the 1960 elections so badly, setting a pattern for the future.¹⁰

By 1962, the Burmese army had been at war continuously since 1942 and fought multiple enemies, both foreign and domestic. The *Tatmadaw* by 1962 believed that they uniquely could protect the Bamar nation from outside forces, and also had the only vision to recreate Burma as

¹⁰ *Tatmadaw* military governments have routinely misread the mood of the public. In more or less free elections in 1960, 1990, 2012, 2015, and 2020, the *Tatmadaw* has routinely subject themselves to evaluation by the people, and lost handsomely. Only the NLD parliamentarians elected in 2012, and 2015 even governed for more than a year or so, and then only at the suffrage of the military. A coup ousted the Parliamentarians in 1962, and those elected in 1990, and 2020 were never seated.

an independent and prosperous country. This was despite their election loss.

Ne Win's historians from the Directorate of Psychological Warfare were tasked with creating his new government. Ne Win told them "We are planning to form a party and open the training center. We need a guiding philosophy for the party. We are sure to emphasize the economic sector, but we also need philosophy" (see Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 190).

A closer look at the development of Ne Win's political thought in the context of Burma's military politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s clarifies Ne Win's decision to develop two texts written by the intellectuals who worked at the Directorate of Psychological Warfare. The two texts were to be the Policy Declaration of the *Burmese Way to Socialism*, and *The System of Correlation between Man and His Environment* (Nakanishi 2013: 63). Ne Win assigned U Chit Hlaing, Colonel Saw Myint, and U Saw Oo, to design the Burmese Way of Socialism (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 174).

They modified guidelines they inherited from the Directorate of Psychological Warfare, and asserted a "Guardian Government" philosophy which drew on elements of Marxism and Buddhism. The draft philosophy, had six sub-titles, reflecting an eclectic mix of Marxist focus on dialectics, and Buddhist emphasis on control of the mind.

1. Dialectic of Matter and Mind
2. Reciprocal Relations of Matter and Mind
3. Dialectics of Man and His Environment
4. Reciprocal Relations of Man and His Environment
5. Dialectical Correlation of Matter and Mind
6. Dialectical Correlation of Man and His Environment (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 191–192)

For the Ethnic minorities, these were to be the justification for policies of assimilation, accommodation, and alienation of alternative cultural traditions. In the 1970s, this would become the violent "Four Cuts Policies" which sought to violently enforce conformity.

But to facilitate the introduction of this philosophy, Ne Win needed a shared vision of who the "us" was for his Burmese heartland. The British-centric curriculum which placed British civilization at the center of Burma would not do for Ne Win's fiercely nationalist Buddhist socialists. What

was needed was a plausible history, which would explain why military discipline was the natural order for a good society, the only way to protect the dignity and integrity of the vulnerable new nation. Sitting on the shelf were already the ideas of the Psychological Warfare Directorate, which focused on the tensions between matter, mind, and environment.

4.7 THE ORIGINS OF NE WIN PHILOSOPHY: THE PHILOSOPHERS FROM THE DIRECTORATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE TAKE OVER

1962 is the key date for the implementation of Ne Win's Burmanization policies; up to that point is just prelude. As will be highlighted in the next chapters, the implementation of Burmanization policies by the BSPP government would begin quickly. Within a few months, the documents spelling out the new philosophy were published, schools reorganized, foreign businesses nationalized, and the purge of alien Chinese and Indian business begun. Offensives against Karen, Communist, and other forces were restarted. Shan and Karenni leaders were imprisoned in a rapidly growing prison system from which many would never emerge again.

Implementing these programs required a grip on the Burmese population which was sustained by the use of "psychological warfare" which conditioned them to believe that pervasive fears were somehow normal and that the only alternative to Tatmadaw rule was a foreign invasion, and chaos at the frontiers. National sovereignty was threatened, and would be preserved by the only institution with the capacity and will to control the country, and preserve its neutrality in international affairs, the *Tatmadaw*.

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Ne Win's Burmanization Ideology: The Burmese Way to Socialism (1962–1966)

5.1 NE WIN TAKES OVER, MARCH 1–2, 1962

On the evening of March 2, 1962, General Ne Win attended the Chinese ballet, in Rangoon. Seemingly it was a normal night. Burma was long accustomed to an erratic sort of politics, in which U Nu and his ministers maneuvered internationally and domestically, taking advantage of contacts with the Americans and their SEATO ally Thailand, and the Soviets, while always watching the Chinese to the north. In 1960, there was even a victory against the Nationalist Chinese army, with the assistance of the newly established People's Republic of China. Domestically, there had been slow victories as the Communist Party of Burma, and the Karen forces lost towns and territory and retreated to the jungles. Also, domestically there was movement in the Shan and Karenni States to hold promised referenda on independence, a subject that was delayed despite guarantees in the 1948 Constitution.

March 1, then was a seemingly normal night. Ne Win shook hands with the Chinese ballet delegation and then seemingly went home to go to bed. Except this wasn't a normal night. Before going to the ballet, Ne Win had left orders that at 2 a.m., the army would go to the houses of U Nu and his ministers and arrest them. Special detachments were sent to the dwellings of the Shan delegation too, and all were arrested. By the time the morning came, the arrests were complete, and there was

one dead, the 17-year-old grandson of Sao Shwe Thaik, the first President of Burma (1948–1952), a Shan, who was organizing conferences promoting federalism, and potentially independence. The boy was to be the first victim of Ne Win's new government, but at the time it seemed to be minor. At 8:50 a.m., Ne Win went on the radio to calmly announce to the nation that the army had seized control of the country in the interest of preserving unity and protecting sovereignty. Students were told to continue with their studies, and workers to continue working (Lintner 1999: 210–213).

The *Burma Weekly Bulletin*, a voice of the military described why the coup was necessary, writing in June 1962:

Like vampires thriving on the blood of others, the [Shan princes known as] *Saophas* had no inclination to relinquish the stranglehold of the people. That was the real reason at the back of their demand for federalism.... Their conspiracy was ultimately to secede from the Union and establish tiny independent sovereign states.... Thanks to the timely intervention of the Defense Services, the Union of Burma has been saved from an unthinkable fate.... (source Smith 1991: 196–197)

General Ne Win sought to make a break with the previous fourteen years since independence. He did this by imprisoning the former government, abolishing the Constitution, and ruling through martial law. He reasoned that he could then begin quickly the purification of Burmese society, defeat disunity in the highlands, and threats from abroad. Ne Win and General Aung Gyi cited the threat of disunion and move toward federalism as the proximate cause, but the discontinuation of such talks was only a small part of what was to happen.

The Military Planning Staff was prepared for this move and was ready to reorganize the entire society into the vision the *Tatmadaw* had for a “disciplined state” (see Callahan 2003: 202–206). Within months, and at most a year or two, nationalizations of foreign businesses, mission schools, and hospitals began. Indian and Chinese businesspeople were put on notice and began to leave or face deportation.

In the highlands, the *Tatmadaw* sought ways to aggressively eliminate the armies from the Burmese Communist Party, Karen, Communist Chinese, and Nationalist Chinese, which were still present. The goals were ambitious, but alas too ambitious. In Ne Win's ambition were sown the seeds of defeat for his ideals. The country was instead pushed into

a sullenness, and violence spread in the highlands. Harsh military rule instead of creating a Socialist Burmese Buddhist utopia resulted in decades of violent insurgency, nonviolent disobedience, and poverty that Saw Eh Htoo wrote about. And thus, Burmanization began.

5.2 NE WIN'S POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND THE NEW REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL

The new government was vested in a Revolutionary Council, which as Chief of Staff and Prime Minister, Ne Win chaired. His second-in-command was General Aung Hlaing. All of the other members appointed in 1962 were military officers whom Ne Win had long known, and trusted. The ideology of the new order was the "Burmese Road to Socialism," and combined Socialist and Buddhist doctrine in a fashion unrecognizable to Socialists or Buddhists outside of Burma.

On March 4th, 1962, two days after the coup, General Ne Win invited Burmese politicians from the previous government and presented his political ideology, which he called "Socialist." Ne Win described his plan as General Aung San's plan, who indeed wanted to build a socialist country which he first described while in Japan for military training in 1940–1941. Omitted were any mentions of federalism (Dr. Maung Maung 1969: 352–353).

The word "Revolutionary Council" meant the ruling junta led the social reform in Burma (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 714). After the coup, Ne Win gathered all the military generals to his office.¹ He asserted as follows

It is inevitable to stage the coup, but we need to rebuild the country. We have rejected the left-wing political ideology in the past, but it is time to modify it and apply it again in our country. Regardless of applying the left-wing ideology or being accused of communist, we have to apply it for the

¹ The military man Ne Win wanted a new ideology. He claimed his political ideology was based on Burmese Buddhist culture; but it really reflected the habits of command he developed as a soldier. Dr. Maung Maung (1969: 354–364), who was a Ne Win supporter and became his philosopher, wrote that Ne Win was a realistic person; he talked less and worked more. But he also talked to the journalists, artists, farmers, blue-collar laborers, and writers about Burmese literature, Buddhism (Jataka), and agriculture. And he was proud of being a "real Burmese" (p. 359). His primary concern became "National Unity and Peace"; therefore, he included ethnic unity policy in his political agenda.

sake of our country's future. I want you to present whatever is good for our country. Now, we have formed the Revolutionary Council, and then we have to present our policy to the people. (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 717)

Ko Ko Maung Gyi tells us that Ne Win selected three people to draft the Burmese Socialist Philosophy. These three were Colonel Saw Myint, U Saw Oo, and U Chit Hlaing. Among those three, U Chit Hlaing was the one who wrote that philosophy. Ne Win himself went on to issue orders later recalled by Chit Hlaing that borrowed terms from Western Marxism, and the conditions specific to Burma, at least as Ne Win saw it.

We have formed the Revolutionary Council. We now need to present our policies to the country. I will tell you the main points I want included in the policies. The most important thing is the economy. The state will have to nationalise all big businesses. We will allow private enterprises in some sectors. We will try to run cooperatives more properly. In this way, we will try to establish the Socialist system step by step. With regard to political matters, we will have to consult with existing political parties. If we can find a way to work together, we will work with all of them. We will institute a one-party system. This is the only option left to us. We will not get very far if we are stuck with the parliamentary system where several political parties compete for power. Other people might call our system the Eastern democracy or proletarian dictatorship. We will have to try it in the interests of the peasants, workers and the general public. Since the majority of the population in our country are peasants, we will have to give them priority. Unlike Communists, we cannot simply give priority to the workers. Well, we will work with not just peasants and workers but anybody who is willing to work for the interests of the country. (See Taylor 2009: 261)

After presenting the philosophy, five members of the group were assigned to draft the party Constitution. They were Colonel Saw Myint, Colonel Kyaw Soe, Colonel Than Sein, U Chit Hlaing, and U Saw Oo (Myat Kine 2009: 13).

The Burmese way to Socialism was not formally codified into the Constitution until 1974. But Ne Win's orders following the coup clearly replaced the federal and democratic essence of the 1947 Constitution with one party, one state, and one system. Borrowing language from Marxist countries, Ne Win insisted that a one-party system was the best solution to implement the "Burmese Way to Socialism" and that a Burmese

form of “Proletariat Dictatorship” was necessary (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2011: 717–718), even if the underlying practice had little to do with Marxism (except perhaps for the dictatorship part). In that Constitution, the country was known as “*Pyidaungsu Thamada Myanmar Nainggan Taw*,” which means Burma’s Union. The party’s name was “*Myanma Socialist Lamsin Party*,” which means Burmese Way to Socialism.

On July 7–8, 1962, in a speech justifying the massacre of students at Rangoon University, Ne Win said the military would fight “sword with sword, and spear with spear,” and claimed that student demonstrators were organized by Communists. One-hundred and seven students were killed. Burmese militarism had returned from the age of kings with a vengeance (see Linter 1999: 214–215).

5.2.1 *The Triumph of 1962, Rooted in 1948*

The Bamar *Tatmadaw* began their rule in 1962 by claiming that the *Tatmadaw*’s struggle and bloodshed paid for independence was the effort of all Burma, not just the Bamar who dominated the army. But in other ways, they assumed away the diversity of the nation for which the Shan, Karen, and others were fighting. The narrative of the eight martyrs, including founder Aung San, were assassinated in July 1947 at the Secretariat office in Yangon, was presented as a noble sacrifice for the whole of Burma and assumed Bamar leadership, while acknowledging that the official martyrs also included Karen, Shan, and Muslims. The leaders of the assassination plot, who were Bamar, were assumed to be British stooges led by, U Saw, the last Prime Minister of British Burma. The departing British, in this respect, remained the enemy. Despite the recognition of the non-Bamar martyrs, the Karen, Kachin, and others were remembered as being allied with the British and against the Bamar-dominated Burma Independence Army during World War II.

After General Aung San was assassinated in 1947, his spirit was promoted as the founder and hero of modern Myanmar, and the source of modern unity, along with the former Bamar Kings. Cenotaphs and tombs were prepared for the victims at Shwedagon Pagoda (see Anderson 1983–1991: 9). And even though many British officers denounced the assassination, the portrayal of the British as a political villain in Burma’s politics dwelt in the people’s minds, and was highlighted by the propaganda of The Directorate of Psychological Warfare.

5.2.2 *The Ideology of 1962*

The political ideology Ne Win created in 1962 emphasized one party, one people, and one country. The federal spirit of Panglong was dead, and assumptions about self-determination and rights to secession, discarded, leaving only military rule. Ne Win and his regime considered the self-determination or a right of secession, under the 1947 Constitution a threat to state sovereignty, and insisted on a new Constitution that emphasized a unified single powerful government. The ethnic leaders understood this as Ne Win's plan to establish a Bamar-led state.

After the 1962 coup, Ne Win dissolved the parliamentary system and formed a new government called the "Revolutionary Council" (RC). In that RC, almost all officials were military officers or military-related civilians. Ne Win also did not trust anyone associated with Prime Minister U Nu, including the new Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant. Still Ne Win did not discard the U Nu's political agenda completely. Ne Win eventually adapted U Nu's Buddhism, to his central planning goals.

Central to the new Revolutionary Council were concerns about national security and sovereignty within international borders. Burma before independence suffered greatly as a battleground between Axis and Allied forces in World War II, and in the aftermath struggled, often unsuccessfully to chart a foreign policy independent of Cold War competition. Under U Nu, a series of informal peace agreements led to the withdrawal of the rebels to the hills, and the Communist Party began exploring ways to participate in electoral politics. Ne Win stopped this moderation and sought to achieve a total victory over the remaining resistance pockets. But attacks on urban students in the name of Anti-Communism, the Shan in the name of combatting separatism, and further isolation of the Karen proved too much, and the wars re-erupted. The Chinese PLA even began to offer direct support to the BCP, to defend itself against Ne Win's military responses (see Lintner 1999: 213–216).

5.2.3 *Foreign Influence and the Economy*

But if counterinsurgency was central to the justification of the coup, nationalization of foreign-owned businesses is what would finance it. A wave of nationalizations of businesses owned by Indians, Chinese, Europeans, and Americans began soon after the coup. The oil industry, rice exports, teak exports, and manufacturing were obvious targets for

military officers keen on eliminating businesses that expatriated profits. The wave of nationalizations in 1963–1964 meant that all export industries, banks, and government ministries became government-owned parastatals, owned by ministries dominated by military officers who staffed Boards of Directors. This put military officers in control of hiring, payrolls, and company profits. Over 200,000 South Asians left the country. International banks left, and the international airport, which had been one of the busiest in the region, ground to a halt. To undermine the elite, the 50 and 100 kyat notes were demonetized. New enterprises were renamed with the name “People’s;” there were People’s Brewery and Distillery and People’s Pride Hairdressing Saloon. A vibrant newspaper sector was undermined and withered (see Lintner 1999: 220–222).

The bigger problem was not just abstract ownership, but the capacity of the newly ascendant military officers to manage banks, oil companies, rice brokerages, teak licensing, and the other activities left to the Indian and Chinese merchant minorities between 1948 and 1962. Crony hiring by officers made things worse, and in coming decades, a formerly vibrant economy slumped further, poverty spread, and companies became decrepit. Coupled with isolationist policies meant to exclude foreign ownership and management, Burma’s economy entered a decades-long slide. And in the mountains, the Karen and Burmese Communist Party took on a new life as poverty spread.

5.2.4 *Citizenship Laws*

The conquest of Burma began in 1824–1825 by the British East India Company and occurred across three wars conducted from Britain’s Indian colony. The British were met with a great deal of hostility in the Burmese-speaking lowlands, and with a range of indifference and enthusiasm in the highlands where one occupier (The Burmese) was exchanged for another (The British). The British colonial playbook developed in South Asia and Africa emphasized the divide and conquer of ethnicities which assumed an “anthropologically-correct essence” in bureaucratic ethnicity categories (Boshier 2018: 80–93; Scott 2009). The harsh occupation of the lowland Burmese was conducted first with the Indian subalterns who ran the government and the businesses. Populations of peasants from Bengal were imported to cultivate commercial rice after 1825 in the lowlands of Rakhine and elsewhere.

This set the ground for what was, and continues, to be, callous claims and counterclaims regarding citizenship in the post-1948 nation. How are ethnic minorities to be accommodated and assimilated in a land now being ruled by Bamar? And who was to be alienated and excluded? In the mind of the ruling Bamar military, there were several categories of such foreigners. First, there were the very visible urban merchant classes and government officials, who were often Indian and Chinese. Then there were the highlanders like the Karen who were obviously indigenous but were problematic because many fought with the British before and after World War II against the Burmese. More substantial numbers agitated for independent Karen State, and the dissolution of the national boundaries inherited from the British. Shan and Karenni were seemingly more accommodative to the Bamar of the AFPFL, but still managed to get clauses inserted in the 1948 Constitution permitting secession. Chin and Kachin, which had large Christian populations, also were restive. All were clearly from the Burmese soil, but were also suspect to the security-conscious *Tatmadaw*.

Finally, there were the poor peasant descendants of Indian farmers, many of them Muslim and Hindu, who crossed a non-existent border in the nineteenth century to farm on lands granted them by the British colonial power which ruled Burma until 1938 as a province of British India.

South Asians, Chinese, Highlanders, Muslims, and Hindus each faced the bureaucratic citizenship regime of first the British government, and the new AFPFL government. For the foreign merchant minorities from India and China, their businesses and property disappeared in a wave of nationalizations after 1962. Those defined as “indigenous” highlanders would need to assimilate into the Burmese Buddhist identity, as promulgated by Rangoon. Rural Muslim farmers from Rakhine, especially the Rohingya, would be subject to a confused citizenship status, which resulted in mass expulsions in 1978, 1991, 2012, and 2017, even after Burmese citizenship was negotiated for them in the 1960s in Rangoon. And of course, all of this happened in the context of a xenophobic Bamar military government which since 1942 learned to trust only themselves, particularly those they attended military academies, where they were trained to kill on command, irrespective of responsibilities to a more abstract sense of national identity.

5.2.5 *Nationalization of Schools and Missions*

Under the British colonial authority, Christian missions were encouraged to build churches, schools, and hospitals. Many of these missions were British and American. These were not formally subsidized by the government, in keeping with British principles of separation of church and state, but government policies favored the foreign-sponsored churches, in ways that the Buddhist temples were not.

Burmese Buddhist monasteries did receive subsidies from the Burmese kings up until their exile in 1885 and were indifferent and at times hostile to the establishment of missions. Mon and Shan had deep roots in Theravada Buddhism, as did many Karen. Most receptive to Christian missions were the Chin and Kachin in particular, and substantial portions of Karen. Karen, Chin, and Kachin also were very receptive to the institution of the church itself, especially the schools and medical facilities associated with missions. The languages associated with the schools were typically the “tribal” language and English (Thako and Waters 2023). As described in earlier chapters, this relationship also translated into favoritism in the Indian Colonial Service, including by the 1920s, the establishment of Kings Rifles units of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen who would go on to fight with the British and against the BIA and Japanese.

In this context, the Christian schools were an obvious target for nationalization after Ne Win's coup of 1962. Nationalization meant that the schools would come under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in Rangoon, which would then replace the teaching staff with teachers accredited in the Burmese government curriculum. In this context, the schools were converted from the ethnic and English curriculum and effectively Burmanized. The school complex in Bassein, which had taught a Karen curriculum, was nationalized and assigned the Burmese curriculum (and teachers) from Rangoon (Thako and Waters 2023).²

Burmese was the language of instruction in primary schools by 1966, a policy later enshrined in the 1974 Constitution, even though about 20% of the population did not speak Burmese, and another 20% spoke Burmese as a second language (Williams and Iwasaki 2022: 118). It was in this context that a number of the armed ethnic groups opened school

² In his memoir of his boyhood in Shan State, Jaiyen (2012) describes how this process appeared to him as a teenager attending the schools which were assigned to the Burmese curriculum in the late 1960s.

systems in the highlands using Karen, Kachin, Mon, Shan, and other ethnic medium instruction, and English. Burmese is taught as a second or third language (see South and Lall 2016). Not surprisingly, Burmese as a second (or third) language courses are typically not that unpopular.

5.3 POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Policies about ethnicity, citizenship laws, and the nationalization of schools and the economy would result in three approaches which would be applied to ethnic minorities. Assimilation policies were assumed for the major groups with a long history in Myanmar such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Rakhine, etc. Such groups were assumed to be similar to the Burmese race (*Taingyintha*), and malleable via schooling, and popular culture both of which the government would control. Indeed, following essentialist principles of ethnicity assumed by British census takers, scholars like Furnivall “set in motion, albeit unintentionally a political ideology which marginalized Burma’s minorities by making some of them out as unfit to participate in democratic government” due to assumptions about the nature of culture (Boshier 2018: 84–85; Cheesman 2016).

Accommodation would be made for immigrant groups with a longer history in the country who were not a threat but maintained separate institutions. The wealthy, but small, Chinese merchant minority was an example of this. They would be permitted to maintain their own schools and cultural institutions.

As for the rest, i.e. those who had arrived at the behest of the British colonial power, they would be alienated, i.e. removed from the country. Ne Win’s government pointed out that the only reason they were in the country in the first place was due to the catastrophe of British colonialism. Obvious examples were the Anglo-Burmese population many of whom were the children of British colonial officer and their Burmese mistresses, and the foreign Christian missionaries who settled in the country. The substantial population of urban Indian Muslims and Hindus, many of whom served the British colonial system, were also viewed as foreign. Finally, the rural Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine was the most obvious large rural group brought in by the British colonial authorities. No matter how deep their roots were in Burma, and how many generations lived there, the military government classified them as Indian, and not Burmese under citizenship laws.

In 1962, Ne Win's government began expelling the missionaries and the Chinese, Indians, and Euro-Burmese. The exodus of missionaries depleted the schools and hospitals of the highlands of staff and financial subsidies from abroad (Augurlion 2017: 78; Thako and Waters 2023). Ne Win's hope was that the foreign "other" created by the missionaries would assimilate back into their assumed Burmese roots.

Also part of the assimilation project was the Burmese Buddhist Highland Mission Association formed in 1936 to challenge Christian domination in the hills. The basic idea was that Buddhism was a way to resist the colonial religion and spread Buddhism in the highland region. The Buddhist monks even requested a permit from the British officers to travel to the highland area before independence (Dhamasariya U Htay Hlaing 1991: 22) and Buddhist monks launched the highland Buddhist mission at that time. After independence, state-sponsored Buddhist missionaries were activated in ethnic areas and were known as *Taungtan Thartha Nar Pyut* (Highland mission).

U Nu, as a devout Buddhist, promoted the Buddhist text in the school curriculum and proclaimed Buddhism as a state religion (Saw Augurlion 2017: 73), even though he also nationalized the schools operated by the Buddhist Sangha (Taylor 2009: 278). In this context, the Highland Buddhist Association became a tool to extend the state power. Ne Win continued U Nu's legacy, though he did not have the personal interest in Buddhist practice that U Nu did. Still, he appreciated that the monks preached both an anti-Western and anti-Communist ideology (Saw Augurlion, 2017: 72), consistent with his Burmese Path to Socialism policies. Still, as the largest institution in Burma besides the army, the monkhood was a threat to Tatmadaw control, and Ne Win was very careful as he shaped them into a nationalistic adjunct to his larger political project. The monkhood was part of a new Buddhist-Bamar identity sponsored by Ne Win, in the name of national unity.³

³ Ne Win's monks highlighted the dangers of Communism in the Buddhist journal *Dhamanyaer*.

5.3.1 *Assimilation (or) Taing Yin Thar Si Long Nyi Nyunt Yay*

Ne Win adapted the assimilation policies to Burmanize the ethnic groups such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine, etc., that living in Burma. He always emphasized in his speeches that the “ethnic” people all came from the same Bamar root.⁴ His reasoning was that since the original religion was Buddhism, and the original ethnic identity was Burmese, a policy was needed to restore the pre-colonial socio-religion, socio-economic, and socio-political order as he imagined it to have been, i.e. one nationality.

Every one of the *Taingyinthas* needs to accept that the amity and unity of all *Taingyinthas* are fundamental to the bidding of an economically and socially Prosperous state that is stable and united. To speak of unity and amity among *Taingyinthas* is to say that Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Chin, Burman, Shan and other *Taingyinthas* inhabiting the Union of Burma need to be resolved to stick together for life, through weal and woe. Only then will *Taingyinthas* be able to join hands with each other and work trustingly for the good of the Union and the good of all its inhabitant races. (Ne Win 1965: 308 in Cheesman 2016: 5)

Ne Win assumed that all that was needed was to assimilate the Karen, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and others so they would revert to the original identity and then ethnic “other” would disappear and would “stick together for life.” Ne Win promoted Buddhism in ethnic states, replacing foreign missionary education with state education mainly taught in Burmese, and expanded government institutions in ethnic areas. Buddhist teachers were placed in distant villages to replace the departed foreign Christian teachers who besides being foreign were never licensed by the Ministry of Education.

While presented as an internal reform, Ne Win’s government also assimilated a foreign school system created by Christian missionaries under the British and terminated foreign aid and support. His foreign policy, the Ne Win government emphasized the neutrality policy pursued since independence in the context of the prevailing Cold War conditions. Ne Win’s foreign policy was not new, except that it focused more on the role of foreigners in education. He modified the previous U Nu government’s policy (1948–1962) with his Revolutionary Council’s political

⁴ BSPP, Revolutionary Council perspective and stance on ethnic account (1964: 14–19).

agenda. Hsin Phyu Kyun Than Tun the Burmese writer, argued that Ne Win purposely diluted the international demand for his political reform. Private education and liberal arts education also declined in importance in the context of the assimilation policies associated with Burmanization. Foreign missionaries were deported.

To facilitate the use of Burmese language (and the elimination of English and ethnic language curricula in the primary schools), the Ne Win government subsidized the Burma translation association and *BamarSar* (Burmese literature) department which played an essential role in translating selected English written text into Burmese.⁵ A University Burmese Translation (founded in 1948) also played a vital important role in translating all texts into Burmese under Ne Win beginning in 1964. Following the establishment of the translation association, English language and literature were withdrawn, and students learned only very basic English and then only after grade five. Using *BamarSar* as a medium also of course undermined the ethnic mother tongue language systems which had existed primarily in highland Burma in mission schools.⁶

Ne Win's centralized education policy was designed to enhance Burmese Socialism and promote the Burmese language (see e.g. Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma 1974: 84–85). Burmanization policies in education effectively excluded ethnic peoples from any role in government organizations and higher positions because they had not graduated from the accredited government education system. The only ethnic people to succeed in this context were those well-assimilated as children who were trained via the Burmese system and language.

From the perspective of the Ne Win government, all non-Bamar ethnic languages were considered mere dialects of Burmese (irrespective of linguistic evidence to the contrary) and played no role in Ne Win's Burmanization system. That system benefitted the Burmese community and neglected the ethnic education development. Ne Win asserted in his speeches that ethnic people who lived on the frontier were uneducated

⁵ The Burma Translation Association was established in 1948 (*Sarpay Beikmann* Burma Translation Association 1952: 8).

⁶ During the British colonial era and fourteen years when the AFPFL-dominated parliament ruled Burma under U Nu, ethnic groups particularly the Karen had national schools where the Karen language was used as a medium language in education. Ne Win's education policy promoted the *BamarSar* at the expense of such ethnic mother-tongue systems. The development of the non-Bamar ethnic schools declined (see also Thako and Waters 2023).

and backward, a condition associated with tier inability to use Burmese well.⁷ The implicit assumption was that development was measured by speaking standard Burmese well, and education in a government school.

The difficulty in his often contradictory positions about both socialism and ethnicity was noted in Robert Taylor's biography of Ne Win who wrote that music and dance of the "eight national races" became important, as was a "Revolutionary Council's Declaration of Faith in Respect of Indigenous Peoples" issued in Loikaw, Karenni State, in 1963 or 1964.

Taylor discussed the philosophical confusion in his biography of Ne Win:

However, while the message behind the music and dance was ethnic diversity, the message of the General's terse remarks was that of human equality. Explaining that it was the championing of alleged ethnic group rights against the unity of the nation-state that had forced the army to seize power, Ne Win pledged that his government would treat all citizens equally. This egalitarian doctrine was, of course, criticized as Burmanization by politicians claiming to speak for particular minorities. Just as the Burmese Way to Socialism had given the impression of communism, yet not being Communist, the government's ethnic policy also both championed, and denied the relevance of ethnicity in public policy in favour of majority denied the relevance of ethnicity in public policy in favour of majority rule and equality of esteem. (Taylor 2009: 277–278)

The expansion of government offices and schools into ethnic areas was a third method to implement to consolidate the non-Bamar ethnic groups. Borrowing an Israeli program, Bamar-speaking soldiers retiring from the military were sent to remote highland areas in an attempt to "Burmanize" the local population.⁸

⁷ BSPP, Revolutionary Council perspective and stance on ethnic account (1964: 31).

⁸ Saw Eh Htoo referred to Thein Pe' Myint book from the 1930s "The beginning of Chin Wi Thay Tha Taing," the encouragement of inter-ethnic marriages is mentioned as a way to promote a "one family and one nation" idea. This idea was to dissipate, and after 2010, there were a series of laws making it difficult to marry across religion lines. This was widely viewed as an effort to prevent Burmese Buddhist women from marrying Muslim or Christian men.

5.3.2 *Accommodation (Nayyar Pay Thi Ah Mat Phut Chin) and Ne Win's System of Ethnic and Linguistic Classification*

The politics of “accommodation” of the other established who belonged to Ne Win’s new nation and who did not. This was consolidated finally in 1982 when Ne Win’s government proclaimed the Burma Citizenship Law which reduced the number of Myanmar’s legitimate ethnic groups to 135, delisting the Rohingya, and accommodated other groups by folding them into new existing categories. If any group was not on the list, they were considered as foreigners and deprived of their citizenship rights.^{9,6}

All ethnic groups in Burma were depicted in government publications (so-called “blue socialist” books) in accordance with Ne Win’s ideology of the “Burmese way to Socialism”. After 1965, the project of ethnic classification continued and was assigned to the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University (today: University of Yangon), especially to the History and Anthropology Departments, under the supervision of Ne Win’s government (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964a).

The BSP’s insistence on the essential nature of language, geography, ethnicity, and citizenship inevitably led to confusion and incoherence. Thus, Ne Win’s linguists recognized three basic types of groups: Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai-Chinese (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964b),¹⁰ while recognizing eight “national races:” the Bamar, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Bamar, Rakhine, and Mon, effectively excluding Chinese and Indian groups from Bengal and elsewhere. These eight “national races” were each granted a “state,” within the union,

⁹ The Rohingya are the most obvious example. They had been considered as one of the ethnic groups of Burma under the U Nu government, but erased them from ethnic list under Ne Win’s 1982 citizenship law.⁶ Historians, social anthropologists, and linguists still debate about which factors are decisive in determining an ethnic groups belong in Burma (e.g. Scott 2009; Ferguson 2015; Steinberg 2001), and in effect who becomes the “other.” “As we argue below, linguistic, biological, or historical aspects do not lead to clear-cut distinctions. This is why Winichakul (1994) and Anderson (1983/1991) both emphasized the cultural constructionism, that is, the ‘imagined’ nature of the concept of ‘nationhood’. Although Winichakul is somewhat critical of Anderson’s tendency to give too much weight to such imagination ‘over the operation in human practices’, such that ‘... the newly imagined community seems to be created out of the frictionless propagation of new ideas like inscribing a new language on a blank sheet of paper’” (Winichakul 1994: 15).

¹⁰ In contrast, traditional linguistics asserts that there are six language families present in Myanmar: SinoTibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian, Kra-dai, Hmong-Mien, and Indo-Aryan.

although these states were not really autonomous from Rangoon's military rule. Nor did they coincide with traditional ethnic boundaries which anyway were often amorphous.

In fact, "the focus on eight major nationality races tended to obscure and confuse the significant diversity that exists within and between non-Bamar communities" (Clarke et al. 2019: 24), as did the conflation with the three linguistic groups. Indeed, among these groups, only the Mon ethnic group had a single dialect that is used widely. Further complication was found among the Chin people who speak more than fifty different dialects: Karen people also have a large number of dialects, which are divided into 11 groups. Kayah (Karenni) people share the same language group with Karen, but are counted as a different ethnic group. The Kachin ethnic groups mostly speak the same dialect, but the Rawang and Lisu of Kachin State speak different languages but nevertheless were grouped together by Ne Win's anthropologists. They were listed as Kachin and distinguished as different clans (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964b: 39). The same inconsistency applies to Bamar (Sino-Tibetan) languages. Thus the state did not recognize Danu people, Inthar people, and Dawei people as ethnicities on their own but considered them as ethnically Bamar even though they lived in Shan State and the Tanintharyi region, respectively, and spoke languages that were not intelligible to each other.

From a biological point of view, the problem of Ne Win's grouping of eight different ethnic groups is seen by the example of the Shan and the Bamar. In Shan State, there lives ethnic groups, such as Pa-O, Wa, and Ta'ang, which were considered legally Shan but are not related linguistically to other Shan people. Indeed linguistically, Pa-O dialect is closer to Karen, but they were not included in the Karen group. The language of the Wa and Ta'ang belongs to the group of Mon-Khmer languages, that is, to the same group as the language of the Mon in the south. Regarding the Bamar, there is an ethnic group known as Moken (or Salon) people (also known as "sea gypsies") who live in the southern Burma archipelago and are considered Bamar, even though their language is Austronesian, unrelated to the Bamar language which is in the Tibeto-Burma (Boutry, 2016: 114–117). Nevertheless, they were included as a proto-Burman group/dialect.

5.3.3 *Alienation (or) Kwaë Char Nyin Pae Chin*

The other side of accommodation was alienation. People who were not accommodated within the classification scheme of “Burmese dialects” became foreigners who were regarded as potential enemies and untrustworthy. This is why, for example, Aung San Suu Kyi’s marriage with a foreigner blocked her from becoming president in 2016. The creation of enemies was also instrumental in his attempt to create a unified Burmese Buddhist nation.

This meant that strong distinctions need to be sustained in custom and law. Anyone deemed a foreigner and lacking citizenship rights was subject to deportation.

Ne Win practiced “alienation,” the separation of the “other,” to reinforce his power and political agenda. He alienated those who were not included in his nation-building plan, and he used what Johan Galtung called structural and cultural violence. The results were refugee camps, political prisoners, illegal torture, surveillance, human rights violation, the protracted civil war, the loss of religious freedom and speech, etc. Victims in the 1960s were Hindu religious sects, Communists and Ethnic Armed Groups, Muslim communities, Christian Communities, and minority Anglo-Burmese. These were all “others” he believed would not be assimilated or accommodated. Ne Win ordered full force to crackdown on them.

Ne Win also assumed that some religious sects, including Buddhists, were inherently a threat to him and the Buddhist Burmese identity as he defined it, and alienated them. Hindu/Buddhist religious sects were among the greatest threats because of their reputation for supernatural powers, including white and black magic. Practitioners were known to seek supernatural power to sustain their longevity in supernatural world,

and on the other hand, they were helping the people in their daily life (U Awbatha 2019: 13–32).^{11,12}

The number of enemies in Ne Win's Burma proliferated. Communists and Karen were still the biggest concern. Other enemies soon returned too. Anti-Communist Brig. Kyaw Zaw, who played an important role in the Burmese Civil War, was fired from the military in 1962 because of his relationship with Communists (Win Tint Tun 2014: 75). Another threat was the anti-Communist American CIA which had supported the Nationalist Chinese forces in the north. Brig. General Maung Maung, was fired from his position because of his history at the Psychological Warfare School in the Philippines (Callahan 2003: 198; Kyi Sein Win 2020). Armed organizations (EAOs), such as KNU, KIA, and MNSP, were also quickly put on the black list of Ne Win's government. As Winichakul (1994: 6) pointed out such otherness is somehow essential in building

¹¹ After the 1962 coup, Ne Win government reorganized all ministries, and combined four ministries under Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs (Dr. Hla Myint 2013: 11). Ne Win's government denounced some

Buddhist sects as heretical, and recognized only nine sects as official Burmese Buddhist sects in Burma. These nine religious sects are considered as the only official groups;

1. Sudhamma Sect (Gana).
2. Shwekyin Sect (Gana).
3. Dhammanudhamma Mahadavara Nikaya Sect (Gana).
4. Dhammavinayanulomamuladvar Nikaya Sect (Gana).
5. Anaukchaung Dvara Sect (Gana).
6. Vluvana Nikaya Sect (Gana).
7. Catubhummika Mhasatipatthana Ngettwin Sect (Gana).
8. Ganavimutti kuto Sect (Gana).
9. Dhammayutti Nikaya Mahayin Sect (Gana) (Dr. Hla Myint 2013:15).

¹² This belief spread among the people, and even some of Ne Win's military officers became the followers. Some military officers owed allegiance to private soldiers who had the supernatural power, which caused problems in the chain of command. "Operation Bodaw," took place in 1976. Ne Win also eliminated the religious sects that did not fit with his Burmese Buddhism nationalism. This Buddhist doctrines of purification was based in Theravada Buddhism, and they were from Aprihaniyadesana (Dr. Hla Myint 2013: 3).

national spirit and identity in such an authoritative polity. But New Win's government after 1962 on the alienation of the other.

5.3.4 *Exclusion and Putative Ethnic History*

Where ethnic categorization on historical arguments was not clear, new history had to be designed to develop creditable, credible, and plausible connections. According to Ne Win's regime, some ethnic groups are considered as not belonging to Burma because of their historical roots, as, for example, the Rohingya in Rakhine State (called "Bengali" by the governments of both the military and NLD) were not on the list because they had putative origins in Indo-British colonial policy. According to the first official categorization by Ne Win's regime in 1965, the Rakhine group includes the Mro (Khume), Kaman, Thet, Maramargyi, and Rakhine. They have different dialects and biological features and were all categorized by the government as "Rakhine." It was regarded as decisive that in the distant past, they presumably lived under the Rakhine Kingdom and did not come from India. For example, the majority of Kama are Muslims of Arabian descent, but because they served Rakhine Kings as archers they were assumed to be Rakhine. Mro and Khume speak a Chin dialect, but they are counted as Rakhine because they had been living in Rakhine since the beginning of the Rakhine Kingdom. Maramargyi are Buddhists, but despite their physical features are similar to Indians, they were also included in the Rakhine group. Similar inconsistencies are found in the ethnic categorization of the Shan. Some Chinese who lived in the Shan state were not listed in the ethnic group, while the *Shan-Tayouk*, who are also Chinese, are classified as a sub-ethnic group of the Shan.¹³

The unusual nature of ethnic categorization by Ne Win's government can also be seen from the variations in the numbers of ethnic groups. In 1973, Ne Win's government classified 144 ethnic groups, and then fixed at 135 in 1982. This is the type of presentation that Kyaw Nay Min (Myo Pya) (2020: 157, 181) made for his Burmese reading audience. However, in 1990, the military government did again some changes to the list, while keeping the number of 135.¹⁴

¹³ News Editor, Botataung Daily Newspaper, 23.2.1973.

¹⁴ News Editor, Working People Daily Newspaper, 26.9.1990.

The categorization of ethnic groups in Myanmar is not based on language, biology, or history, but on political alliances and demands for historical plausibility, and must be creditable for the current military regime. Ne Win's political agenda made this explicit in 1964 in "The Revolutionary Council's Policy on Ethnicity in Burma," which asserted that ethnic people were living in Burma since ancient times but also descended from the Tibeto-Burman group (BSPP 1964b: 33–34) so, however anthropologically improbable, were part of the Burmese people. At its simplest level, of course, such divisions had their primary roots in British "divide and conquer" colonial policy which divided the highlands into specific ethnic "principalities" and "tracts" leading to what James C. Scott called "ethnogenesis."

5.4 THE MEANING OF BURMESE WAY TO SOCIALISM

Ne Win's political ideology, the Burmese Way to Socialism was based on "The System of Correlation of Man and the Environment." Ne Win assigned three officers to draft this philosophy, based on Burmese Culture, Buddhism, and Marxism. Ne Win instructed them that the ideology must include the above three concepts, but must adjust to Ne Win's own "Burmese context" (Myat Khine 2009:18). There were five chapters in a book, which was blue, and was to become well-known in the school system, and Burmese households.

The blue color was to distinguish it from the red book, the Communist Party. The book was called "The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment" reflected Ne Win's concept of how he wanted to recreate Burma (BSPP 1964c). A first edition prepared by U Chit Hlaing was criticized by monks as being anti-religious and was modified twenty-one months later (Taylor 2009: 276), which is cited below. On the first page of the book, it was written as follows:

This is a statement of the Philosophy of the Burma Socialist Programme Party as approved and adopted by the Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma at its twenty-second meeting. "The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment" forms the guide to the Burma Socialist Programme Party which considers that the citizens of the Union of Burma should know and appreciate it. In compliance with a resolution of the Central Organizing Committee of the Party, therefore, the Secretary publishes it herewith. (BSPP 1964c: 1)

This BSPP Blue Book was first printed in 1963 and is important for understanding the emergence of Burmanization policies. The book spread BSPP's philosophy to the members of their party and the nation. The original language of the philosophy was written in Burmese but translated into English. Most of the Burmese terms were from Buddhist Pali, whose meanings were embedded in Buddhism. The combination of Burmese Buddhist culture and Marxism was the backbone of the book. A dialectical way of reasoning which is consistent with Marxism and Buddhism was assumed.

5.5 BURMESE CULTURE AND THE BLUE BOOK

Burmese culture is the key concept in the Blue Book and is the key idea for how it is constructed. Three main ideas are rejected: Colonialism, communism, and feudalism. Implicitly endorsed was the Burmese monarchical system. In this system, the king was the master of all realms, and the people were the subjects of the king, and subject to his every whim. Ne Win's nationalists considered Burmese system of absolute monarchical rule as a source of Burmese culture to be emulated because only the purified Burmese culture was ever independent from foreign domination.

The BSPP's policymakers considered the development of their philosophy from the Burmese political context. From this, the system moved on to describe a Marxist-style dialectical development of BSPP philosophy. Borrowing from Marx, this started from landlord, feudalism, and colonialism (Viktor Afanasyev, 1963: 272). The doctrine adapted to Burma follows:

In the age of the slave system the means of production of society were monopolized by the slave-owning class. The masses of slaves were exploited, and the fierce antagonism that existed between the two classes roughly represented the content of the slave system.

In the age of feudalism, the means of production of society were monopolized by the feudal lords. The masses of serfs were exploited. The antagonisms between feudal lords and serfs and those between feudal lords and capitalist merchants roughly represented the content of the feudal society.

In the age of capitalism, the means of production are in the hands of the capitalist class de jure merely by virtue of the bourgeois legal system. The class which holds no capital, i.e. the working class, is exploited. Continuous

class struggles between capitalists and workers form the main feature of the capitalist system. (BSPP 1964c: 20)

When Ne Win conceived this philosophy, he instructed his philosophers to construct the idea from a materialist economic base (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 717), which meant in his mind that his BSPP philosophy pointed to a social revolution (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 714). Marxist Philosopher Viktor Afanasyev (1963: 85) wrote that the law of passage of quantitative into qualitative changes indicated the revolutionary change, the continuous transformation of intrinsic qualitative changes of objects into commodities. In developing such ideas, though, the emphasis was on the idea that Burma was different from Ne Win's enemies, the Burmese Communists with their roots in China and Russia.

Ne Win's biggest philosophical problem, though, was to specify why his socialist philosophy was different from the Burmese Communist philosophy. Burmese Communists he asserted, had simply borrowed Chinese and Russian versions of Communist ideology, and Ne Win started out by pointing out that both were unsuitable for Burma (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 723).¹⁵ Adapting the language of Marx, Ne Win instructed his officers when they were drafting the philosophy focused on psychology, which they saw as distinguishing themselves from orthodox Soviet Chinese Marxist doctrine. Here is how the reasoning went.

We cannot do as parliamentary government to have the multi-party system and compete in the election. So, we have to practice the proletariat dictatorship for the peasants, blue-collar labors, and people. Majority of our populations are farmers. We cannot prioritize the blue-collar like Communist do. It not only included peasants and labors but also those who are good-minded. (Ko Ko Maung Gyi 2013: 718)

In their philosophy, they explicitly rejected the BCP ideology, expressed the odd relationship by referring to "mind and mental factors" reflecting Burmese Buddhism:

¹⁵ This is why he asked his policymakers to adapt the philosophy with the Burmese approach. Marxists asserted that the root cause of the problem is the starting point of the conflict. Thus, Russian Communists basically emphasized class struggle through the industrial revolution. The Chinese underlined on peasant community who were working on the land (Tin Tun Naing 2017: 45).

The notions and actions of some so-called “leftists” are subverting the socialist aim. How? In what way are these leading towards just the reverse of the socialist aim? With their dogmatic views of vulgar materialism some so-called “leftists” appear to pay scant heed to mind and mental factors. Their way of thinking and doing things is wholly ensnared by their habitual “matter-matters-most” bias and outlook. (BSPP 1964c: 34)

The BSPP philosophy condemned the leftists BCP philosophy. Ironically, the Communists were regarded as a threat to building socialism.

The vulgar materialism of the so-called “leftists” is thus heading towards the reverse of the socialist aim. (The experiences of the leftist circles of Burma and of some countries may be critically reviewed to provide lessons. (BSPP 1964c: 34)

Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism was designed explicitly to differ from the conventional Communist ideology. Ne Win's ideology confused the people in Burma as well as international communities. Thant Myint-U (2021: 32) was critical of this ideology which he finds confusing and inchoate, albeit for good reason. He wrote “The official ideology was a half-baked mélange of socialist, nationalist, and Buddhist ideas,” which was true. But then, Ne Win's philosophers were not writing for a critical audience of comparative political scientists, but for the Burmese masses who were susceptible to a righteous ideology that protected them against their enemies and fears. The point is, inchoate or not, you cannot understand Burma or Burmanization unless you dive into the philosophical underpinnings, which gave expression in Ne Win's nationalistic Burmanization policies, which are widely believed by people who have been through the Burmanized school system that Eh Htoo experienced.

5.6 BUDDHIST WAYS AND MARXIST WAYS

Ne Win's invention of the Burmese Way to Socialism was embedded in Burmese political culture explicitly through the education system, where Eh Htoo came to understand it. Its mix of nationalism, Buddhism, and Marxism made sense within the communicative system which Eh Htoo was socialized into, as it did for every other Burmese child born since about 1960. Ne Win's BSPP philosophy outlasted his regime and remains in the habitus of government institutions, schools, and religion. The official ideology may be considered a half-baked mélange of socialist,

nationalist, and Buddhist ideas by Western critics, but it was widely accepted. And so as classical sociologist W. I. Thomas wrote in 1929, “If man define situations as real, they are in their consequences.”

Ne Win called both the Communists and capitalists’ vulgar materialists, which perhaps they are. But the most unique feature of BSPP philosophy was Buddhism, something that traditional Burmese communists/leftists never engaged with. Communists distrusted Buddhism because it was a religion, which they considered to be an “opiate” and a “sigh of the oppressed.” Thakin Soe an early Communist leader, asserted in 1938 that capitalists used the religious leaders to generate fear of Communists while they built their wealth. Neither Soviet nor Chinese Marxists valued religion, preferring like the capitalists to emphasize materialism in their philosophical approach.

BSPP policymakers inserted Buddhism into their philosophy, as a way to distinguish themselves from the BCP, the capitalist West, and the Christian and Muslim communities. The first term that Ne Win’s policymaker used several times in their philosophy was “middle way,” and “harmony” in which Buddha had shown the liberation of the chain of life circle. It is written as follows:

The [Burmese] socialist way of democratic life brings the individual and social interests of man into harmony. Socialist democracy is a way of harmonizing the interest of each individual and those of the society. In other words, it is a way of *practice which by means of a dialectical method* unites the will and desire of each individual and that of society. By the term dialectical method, we mean an application of the practice of dialectical approach on the basis of our socialist programs, *a middle way of practice* which is free from both the left and the right deviations. (BSPP 1964c)

The emphases on practice and middle way, reflect the Buddhist origins of this thought. Mixed in is the term, dialectical, which as Paragu (2015: 7–14) mentioned reflects another similarity between Buddhism and Marxism: both rejected God. Nevertheless, Ne Win’s BSPP, focused by Buddhist thought, accepted the role of spirituality in human society. This is part of the practice of the middle way. BSPP’s middle way was the applied Buddha’s teaching about men and society.

In encouraging the will and initiative of the people their spiritual life must also be improved. We believe in the maxim that wholesome morality is possible only when the stomach is full. The program of the socialist

economy is to establish a new peaceful and prosperous society by filling the stomach of everyone and raising his moral standards. (BSPP 1964c: 31)

Thus, BSPP linked Buddhism's definition of the transient world to Marxists' view on historical materialism. After all, The Buddha's teaching is based on cutting attachment to impermanent world where Marxist's teaching is dedicating to establishing a permanent communion.

The BSPP used a Buddhist formula and defined the human being as being in three realms. Humans they wrote are living in the material world consisting of the whole of our material environment, called *Okasaloka*. The animal world consists of all living and sentient beings like mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish, and is known as *Sattaloka*. The last one is the phenomenological world consisting of the entire process of nature manifested in the spacetime continuum of mind and matter events, interacting in infinite patterns, and is *Sankharaloka*. These concepts are Buddhism, and unrelated to Marxism. But BSPP philosophy connected the two using the following reasoning;

Man is egoistic and self-seeking by nature. However, man cannot live alone. In order to solve himself from the forces of nature and other dangers, man has to enter into a life of social relations with others of kind.....The life of social relations is dependent upon the conditions of livelihood (the conditioned of the production of man's material and social needs); the life of social relations is caused and developed by production (livelihood). (BSPP 1964c: 23–25)

One of the significant concepts that Ne Win's philosophers applied was "*Annam annapaccayo*," which means "mutuality condition," and was directly quoted from the twenty-four Conditional Activities (*Patthana*). According to "*Annam Annapaccayo*," the mutuality conditions are based on three basic concepts, which are

1. The four immaterial (i.e. mental) aggregates are related to one another by mutuality condition.
2. The four great essentials are related to one another by mutuality condition.
3. At the time of conception, mind and matter are related to each other by mutuality condition (Cittasukha Buddhist Academy 2016: 181).

Ne Win and his generals spread that ideology among the institutions that supported his political machine and re-published the philosophical book after the party officially recognized the book as doctrine. Policies were embedded into the bureaucracies of schools, the justice system, religion, land tenure, and business practices to make sure that this would happen under the benevolent protective vigilance of an all-seeing military-ruled state. The Burmese military habitually returns to its doctrines of the dialectics of both transient Buddhism and Marxist materialism.

This doctrine is the context for the prolonged civil war, economic destruction, and militarization.¹⁶

5.7 PEACE TREATIES, CEASEFIRES, AND OTHER FOLLIES ON THE BURMESE ROAD TO SOCIALISM

Peace talks were a constant in Burma's recent political history. General Ne Win offered peace talks to ethnic Armed Groups and Burmese Communist Parties on June 10th, 1963. On August 15th, 1963. Peace talks with Communist groups began and ended on August 19th (Yan Kyaw 2017: 32–33). There were five days of peace talks with Communist groups. On September 29th, another two-month round of peace talks with the KNU, NMSP, Karenni Progressive Party, and Chin Leading Group began, but ended on November 14th, 1963. The following pre-meeting requests were made by the opposition groups:

1. Establish a nationwide ceasefire during the peace talks and allow journalists to freely express their opinions on the proceedings.
2. The Revolutionary Government must ensure the safety of rival party leaders and provide adequate travel and communication time.
3. A press conference will be held (Win Tint Tun 2014: 341–342).

These requests were accepted by Ne Win, with the exception of the nationwide ceasefire. Ne Win turned down that request and instead

¹⁶ U Chit Hlaing, one of the officers who drafted the philosophy in the 1960s said that the system is good, but their mismanagement failed the BSPP (Myat Khine 2009: 20). Other critics said that the bureaucracy failed the BSPP, not the ideology (Win Tint Tun 2014: 415).

sought individual agreements with the different combatants. Later, the EAOs and Communist Parties mainly wanted to discuss the “pre-independence accord,” also known as the “Panglong Agreement,” which seemingly endorsed a federal system, self-determination, and the promotion of democratic (Win Tint Tun 2014: 343–350). But Ne Win rejected all of them; he had no intention of making a deal with the insurgents. Rather than discussing what they wanted, Ne Win summoned them to the table to agree on what he had to offer. He only wanted opposition groups to sign on to his political plan, the Burmese Path to Socialism, which eventually became the 1974 Constitution (Yan Kyaw 2017: 40).

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Ne Win's Political Ideology: One Culture, One Economy, One Military (1967–1989)

Deny the water to the fish and the water buffalo swimming in the pool of water hyacinth.—General Ne Win

6.1 FROM BUDDHIST DESTINY (BARAMI) TO FOUR CUTS

6.1.1 *One Culture, One Economy, One Military*

In 1962, Ne Win named his military government the Revolutionary Council (RC) and assumed dictatorial political power. U Chit Hlaing, the Marxist, assisted him in presenting the philosophy known as Burmese Socialism a few short months later. Using the charts and graphs of central planners, Ne Win began constructing the ideological foundation for his regime. The short- and long-term plan was rooted in an identity that emphasized Bamar Buddhist and concentrated power in Rangoon in the military government. Administrators habituated to army discipline from their years fighting the British, Japanese, Communists, and Karen would run the civilian bureaucracies. From this leadership emerged policies emphasizing one culture, one economy, and one military. The specific policies for Burmese hegemony emphasized first ethnic assimilation, accommodation of modest differences among assimilated minorities, and alienation of those deemed unsuitable for accommodation in the new Burma.

6.1.1.1 *Burmese Buddhist Cultural Identity and Burmanizing the Country*

General Ne Win was a military man first, and a politician only later. He was also a man raised in the Burmese heartland, cultivated at the University of Rangoon, and then swept into an army established with principles established by the invading Japanese/BIA forces. In World War II as a commander under General Aung San, Ne Win made quick decisions about loyalty, trust, life, and death. The men he fought with, trusted, and promoted came from the same Burmese-speaking heartland and looked to him to recreate a world in which military discipline would protect not only themselves from enemies, but the nation as well. As veteran soldiers they were of course always careful of those they did not know—betrayal was always a danger—the remembered the British gallows were active during the colonial era Saya San rebellion of the 1930s. Ne Win's soldiers and their Japanese Allies also drew the hatred of the Karen families they brutally massacred after 1942. And then in 1944–1945, they betrayed their Japanese patrons and entered into an alliance with the hated British, who at the end of the war betrayed Aung San and Ne Win by refusing to grant the independence they sought, and even briefly issued arrest warrants. As many as a million Burmese and invaders died in the three years that Burma was used as a battlefield by the Axis and Allied powers—fighting over British India. The level of distrust was so high that the Burmese were easily convinced that the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet was orchestrated by the British. And perhaps they were right at some level.

In this context, in 1948, the Karen military units, the Burmese Communist Party commanded by compatriots Thakin Soe and Than Tun, and other ethnic units turned on Ne Win and his *Tatmadaw*, pushing them into Rangoon. The war turned, and in 1950, the government of U Nu created a semblance of control, particularly over the areas of the central plains in the Bamar-speaking heartland. Such was the crucible of betrayals in which Ne Win created policy following the 1962 coup. At the heart of this first was a Burmese Buddhist identity, sons of the soil, born to rule in the militant traditions of great kings of whom the martyred Aung San was the most recent. English, Karen, Kachin, Communist, Indian, and other identities would be eliminated. All would be Burmese. Burmese identity and their Bamar language would dominate schools, and implementation for all policies would be brought under the direct command of trusted military officers. The military would effectively command politics.

6.1.1.2 *Ne Win's Nation Building Begins: Buddhism Plus Politics*

To put a softer face on the military's tactics, Ne Win used Buddhism to further his political aims after 1962, even though he did not have the personal commitment to Buddhist practice of his civilian predecessor U Nu. So while borrowing U Nu's plan for building the country with Buddhist identity (U Nu 2012: 198–199), General Ne Win, announced a proposal that Buddhism would be combined with socialism as a basis for government policy (Taylor 2009: 297). It was convenient too that conservative strains of Buddhism legitimated the power of kings and the importance of authority.

Ne Win started his nation-building project by modifying the country's map, creating seven "states" each assigned to a particular "national race," and seven "divisions" covering much of the central part of the country where just the Bamar population lived. This was putatively a nod to federalism, but in fact, it was a deceptive move, with six of the seven "races" assumed under the principle of *Taingytha* to be variations of the dominant Burmese race. The capital of Rangoon remained at the center of the country, and power flowed to and from the army headquarters there. The state governments remained under military rule, and Ne Win reserved to himself the power to appoint the ethnic governors, who were typically assimilated army officers.

Notably, there was no formal Bamar state even though Ne Win claimed that Bamar nationality was only one nationality of eight. But in the Bamar center of the country, over 60% of the population remained at the center of the dictatorship. The seven states and seven divisions gave the illusion of federalism (Khine Lin 2015: 73). The seven states gave the illusion of autonomy and were mainly on the frontiers surrounding the seven divisions. The new map reflected the essence of "we-ness" of the Bamar vs. the others who were ethnic (see Winichakul 1994: 169).

Economic and political nationalization followed as the second step after the coup; The existing ethnic, and national institutions, including those in the new states, were nationalized. Under the centralized Ministry of Education in Yangon, Ne Win Burmanized all the schools with Burmese-language instruction (Taylor 2015: 275–276). The Burmese language became the medium and was an official language in both education and government offices. All the government school textbooks were based on Burmese culture; and ethnic cultures were accommodated only as appendages of the Burmese culture (Yay 2018: 201). Burma's nationhood was re-imagined as a Bamar-centric with no other salient identity

or essence. Ne Win asserted he was “decolonizing” and restor ancient unitary essence as rooted in the new narrative. The assertion was that Burma had been “one race” before the British arrived in 1824, and would once again be one people after the British departed. The English language was de-emphasized, and ethnic language instruction was discontinued.¹ To implement the Burmese Way to Socialism, they promoted Burmese from the first grade, irrespective of mother tongue brought to first grade, as Saw Eh Htoo himself recalled.

The socialist regime also eliminated English and the ethnic languages from their administrative system. Henceforth, all government documents were to only be in Burmese. In this fashion, General Ne Win reformed the systems that were inherited from the colonial system.

6.1.2 *The Monkhood*

Ne Win asserted control over the monkhood, with its potential for revolt. The Burmese monkhood was a large institution scattered around the country and which received loyalty from the masses. Indeed the army and the monkhood were the only national institutions, at independence, and both were potentially powerful. During the British colonial time, the monkhood was the earliest source of revolt against the colonial authority. During the U Nu years, the monkhood had an elevated status due to U Nu’s personal interest in Buddhism; indeed, U Nu had entered the monkhood several times by the time of the 1962 coup and was known for taking extended religious retreats from his government duties.

But for Ne Win, the monkhood was also a threat to his legitimacy, which is why he sought to control it. Ne Win attempted to register all monks in the 1960s in an attempt to institutionalize and centralize the monkhood (Charney 2009: 119). Sects that sustained themselves outside this structure were quickly labeled heretical (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012 253; Taylor 2009: 357–360). But Ne Win also saw Buddhism as a counterbalance to that too (Ministry of Defense 1994: 4; Charney 2009: 102). Thus, even though he preferred to build a secular state, monks were a political opportunity as well. Monks played their role as the sons of Buddha, who protected and carried out the teaching of

¹ English as a foreign language was discontinued from grades 1–4. Formal instruction began at Grade 5, a level few of Burma’s students reached in 1962 or after.

Dhamma and guided the Buddhists on how to live their lives spiritually, particularly with respect for government authority.

Embedding Burmese Buddhism into the national identity reunited the Bamar Buddhist community, creating a sharp demarcation between “us and them.” In this world, the “we” became the people who lived under the light, a legal people. The insurgents were living in the darkness, whether they were of a different ethnicity or Communist origin; they were the illegal people. The division of this territory between states and division, in fact, gave advantages to the Bamar population; their areas were larger than their presence on the ground, and the non-Bamar group was hemmed in by the artificial borders of the new states, which were called Shan, Kachin, Karenni/Kaya, Mon, Karen/Kayin, Chin, and Rakhine/Arakan.

6.1.3 *Barami*

Burmese Buddhists believed in *Karma*, which is the doctrine of cause and consequence in the life cycle and is linked to *Sakya Wada* (Nyo Mya 2003:146–158). A ruler is assumed to have completed their good actions in previous lives and advanced to a higher level in their afterlife, in preparation for kingship. This legitimizes ruler, and it becomes the duty of the people to accept the ruler as the one pre-destined to the task. Finding the next leader is done by recognizing the context of personal virtues, heroism, observing bloodlines, and the emergence of personal leadership qualities that reflect virtues cultivated in previous lives.

The leader himself comes forth as a result of *Barami*, which is the personal quality of one who commands. Sometimes this is translated as “charisma,”² but this is not quite enough. *Barami* is a personal power that emerges as a result of *Karma*, and in Buddhist art appears as a halo around the head of the leader. The point was that *Barami*, assumes to be a unique capacity to lead and make final decisions is not learned through training or study in the current life, such as is found in a Master’s in Public Administration Program, or even a military academy. One is born with *Barami*, and in Burmese tradition, this is where the power of the king came from. For General Ne Win, he assumed that he had inherited it from the previous Kings. In more recent decades, it can perhaps be said

² Sarkisiyanz (1965: 59) calls this a soteriological rationalization with respect to *Barami* because it emerges from, a cosmic harmony between heavens and earth.

that Aung San and his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi were born with the power of *Barami*. Recognition of *Barami*, and whoever holds it, leads to a stable but conservative governance.³

6.1.4 *Burmese Way to Socialism and Centralized Economic Reform*

During U Nu's first AFPFL government (1948–1958), state policy encouraged foreign investment and private ownership of property, in a nod to laissez-faire capitalism. Foreign-owned companies ran their business in post-independent Burma as a legacy of British colonialism, particularly those dealing with rice production, teak production, gems, oil, and natural resources exploitation. State-controlled economic activities were limited. Ne Win nationalized every foreign company under his economic plan (Mya Maung, 1991: 118; Myat Khine, 2009: 35; Kyi Sein Win 2020: 232). Among the giants nationalized were Steel Brothers Company, East Asiatic Burmah Oil Company, the banks, and trading houses (Holmes 1967: 190).

Finally, mass repatriations of foreigners began, particularly of Indians brought by the British to manage businesses and operate the colony's administrative apparatus, Chinese businesspeople, Anglo-Burmese, and European Christian missionaries. The population of Indians was substantial; before World War II, Indians dominated Rangoon trade, and even in 1962, they still controlled a large share. In this context, strong distinctions between Burmese, foreigners, and ethnics emerged. Ne Win framed this as a citizenship issue, in which there was a binary opposition between Burmeseness and non-Burmeseness.

The nationalization of Burmese socialist economic reform did not stop with appropriating Indian and Chinese business activities; relentlessly nationalized were any institutions supported by foreign countries, including Christian missionary schools and hospitals, social service agencies, and religious organizations. For ethnics, the nationalization of the schools sponsored by Protestant missions and the Roman Catholic Church was particularly traumatic, because it effected the mother-tongue-based ethnic schools which after 1962 were moved to the Bamar-dominated Ministry of Education in Rangoon. The new policies meant

³ Political science studies of constitutional monarchies find that they are sometimes more stable than constitutional republics. See, e.g. Ankar (2021).

that these schools became Burmese medium schools. Government subsidies and recognition of Karen, Shan, Kachin, Mon, and other ethnic curricula were withdrawn.

General Ne Win and his military officers actually began implementing these economic policies after conducting the first coup in 1958. Colonel Aung Gyi, who was the Army's deputy commander, designed the economic planning during that short period (General Maung Maung 2018: 224–249). When U Nu returned in 1960–1962, he reversed Ne Win's decisions. But after Ne Win's second coup in 1962, the military resumed the program of economic nationalization. Brigadier General Tin Pe planned these efforts, which included a focus on the nationalization of the private sector, placing them into administration by military-dominated ministries. Military officers who owned the remaining private companies were favored for contracting and stock options (Charney 2009: 123).

The social and economic reforms began in Rangoon's ministries. This exacerbated animosity between ethnic Bamar and the remaining ethnic people. Burmese cultural, belief systems, and social practices were privileged above others. Everywhere, Ne Win put ethnic Bamar at the center, resulting in a Bamar chauvinism known as "*Maha Lu Myo*," which means superior race. If anyone did not support the newly nationalized economic system, access to business opportunities became difficult. The Chinese and Indians remain were compromised and assimilated in the neo-Burmese.

6.1.5 *Burmese Military Doctrine as Driving Force for Burmanization*

When Ne Win assumed state power, he applied what he knew from the military command structure across the bureaucracy. He did not want a multiparty system with competition for power which he viewed as inefficient, and made achieving his political goals more difficult. Ne Win's one-party government system was rooted in an assumption of military-like command and obedience Ne Win first learned about from the Japanese during World War II. Militaries have a fundamentally different way of approaching tasks—there is a military mindset, as Eh Htoo used to tell me, which means that the officers do not readily seek diverse voices, and then consensus. That is what democratic parliamentarians seek, not military officers protecting national sovereignty. Almost every cabinet member Ne Win appointed had a military service background,

and a mindset created in the fulcrum of military academies, and military campaigns in the hostile highlands of Burma (Kyi Sein Win 2020: 140–145).

Callahan (2003: 8) emphasized that post-war Burmese regimes were made up of warfighters who never mastered the art of politics well enough to win a single free election, a record they continued to maintain by losing in 1960, 1990, 2012, 2015, and 2020. In spite of electoral defeat and widespread domestic and international reprobation, military rule endured. The military pushed through plans they believed would restore the glory of the Burmese kingdoms of the past, while eliminating enemies which threatened those plans. They continue to see only the military as the single institution capable of protecting national sovereignty.

Ne Win described the role of *Tatmadaw* in “The Policy Declaration of the Revolutionary Council,” in which the role of defense service is as follows:

The existing Defense Services will also be developed to become national armed forces which will defend our socialist economy. (BSPF 1964b: 48)

Beginning about 1959 after the 1958 semi-coup, the military junta began calling itself “the guardian government,” and the military published an instructional book called “The National Ideology and The Role of the Defense Services.” It was written that the Burma Army (*Tatmadaw*) will not allow any party dictatorship or rebels to harm the Constitution of the Union (Ministry of Defense 1959: 12). Money from the government coffers poured into the development of military training facilities, weapons procurement, and offensives against remote ethnic armies.

6.1.5.1 *Anti-insurgency Doctrines*

After the 1962 coup, Ne Win strengthened the military authority and redesigned it to become the backbone of politics. His *military* modernization started with national armed forces, also known as the People’s Army (*Pyithu Tatmadaw*) and Socialist Army. He declared that this *Tatmadaw* would protect the Burmese Way to Socialism (*Pyithu Tatmadaw* Book series 5905, 1974: 177). Transforming the Burma Army to the “People Army,” the Ne Win government educated the military officers; and they began incorporating political training programs into

the military curriculum (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 24; *Pyithu Tatmadaw* 1974: 178).

In the “Affairs of People Army,” which was published in a restricted edition, it was declared that the People Army’s fundamental objective was to protect the socialist life of the people against invaders, whether they were from the inside or outside (*Tatmadaw* Information Committee, n.d.: 7). The transformation of the State Army to *Pyithu Tatmadaw* (People Army), the following basic logic was understood (*Pyithu Tatmadaw* Book, pp. 183–184).

1. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* was born from the people.
2. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* always put people’s interests first place.
3. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* always follows the political leadership of BSPP.
4. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* always upgrades our political beliefs and our ability.
5. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* is mature in political and revolution transition and will stand as a People’s Army in the Burmese Socialist transition.
6. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* was built for and stands with the people’s interest.
7. Our *Pyithu Tatmadaw* will always protect and give life for the country and people.

The basic philosophy of *Pyithu Tatmadaw* was merged with the BSPP’s philosophy. Ne Win spread “Burmese Socialism” throughout the defense organization and cultivated his military officers to run the country using these ideologies. Admission to the Burmese political sphere implied coming of age through the *Tatmadaw*’s training system, inherited from the *Tatmadaw* of the revered Aung San’s Thirty Comrades, the 1942 invasion of Burma, and the doctrines taught in physically and mentally demanding military academies. Becoming a military officer implied commitment to the Blue Book and the Burmese Way to Socialism.

Ne Win’s *Tatmadaw* also sent military officers to study counterinsurgency with the goal of eliminating Communist rebels and ethnic rebels. Ne Win’s army sent their officers all over the world seeking to modernize his *Pyithu Tatmadaw*. The military doctrine changed from

fighting conventional warfare to fighting a “people’s war,” and became accepted as military doctrine in 1965 (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 23–25). People’s war doctrine was later known as Four Cuts doctrine (*Phyet-Lay-Phyet*), which would terrorize the country for the next decades, and indeed continues to define *Tatmadaw* goals in the 2020s. The Four Cuts sought to cut food supply to the insurgents; to cut financing from villagers and the insurgents; to cut contacts (intelligence) between the people and the insurgents; and to make the people “cut off the insurgents” (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 26).

General Saw Maung wrote a Burma Military History (Kyi Sein Win 2020: 564). This history emphasized that the ideal military soldier was the heir to traditions stretching back to the eleventh century. Being proud of Burmese history linked them to the Burmanized national unification project. Burmanizing the non-Burmese, continued as a mission as a military legacy. No one was above the military.

Those deemed to be rebels against the government were imprisoned arbitrarily. Political prisoners were sent to a prison colony in the Andaman Sea (Ko Ko Island) for a life sentence in prison (Kyaë Mone U Thaung 1991: 91). Those released from the prison were under surveillance, and their livelihood activities restricted. The government created a system requiring recommendations for “good politics” from a local village leader known as “the quarter headmaster,” who was an officer in the military government who represented a block of about 300 families or the township headmaster. Such a recommendation was necessary for any government or private job. Without those recommendations, it was difficult to survive in the government-centralized economic system; private business was not allowed. Moreover, they created *jus sanguis* law to define Burman citizens and foreigners; people with foreign ancestry were not eligible for full citizenship; they were ineligible only for a temporary residence card (Khin Maung Kyaw 1971: 114–119). Most affected by this law are Pakistani and Indian descendants who came to Burma with the British and a few Chinese from the mainland (Khin Maung Kyaw 1971: 28, 43).

6.1.5.2 *Four Cuts Military Doctrine*

Ceasefire and peace agreements were the carrot for EAOs under Ne Win, but the harsh alternative was the counterinsurgency doctrine known as Four Cuts, which was designed to isolate civilian populations supporting Ne Win’s enemies. Four Cuts doctrines emerged from the attempts by

central governments around the world to control restive rural populations. The British had conducted similar operations in Malaysia. The Yugoslavs successfully resisted invasions from Germany and Italy in World War II using such tactics, and the Israelis had by the 1960s seemingly pacified the Palestinian population with anti-insurgency programs.

The *Tatmadaw's* Four Cuts campaigns are notorious within Burma. They began in the 1960s, and to a large extent are the military doctrine shaping Tatmadaw since.⁴ The Four Cuts reflect counterinsurgency policies developed by British and American forces seeking to neutralize rural areas in Malaya, the Philippines, and later Vietnam. Villages under the control of the rebels are isolated, and they denied the four things needed to sustain insurgent operations: money, recruits, food, and intelligence. In practice, what this means is that civilian populations are attacked, so mass arrests can be made of males, villages burned, and civilian populations moved out of areas, and into displaced person camps, “strategic hamlets,” inside Burma, or in the case of Burma, refugee camps in Thailand and Bangladesh.

Four Cuts became necessary, the *Tatmadaw* believed, in the 1960s following increased activities on the Thai border by Karen and Shan groups, and along the northern Chinese border where the Burmese Communist Party, Kachin Independence forces, Shan forces, and others controlled territory. As Lintner (1999: 210–337) describes, the rebellious groups generated income from a range of activities, including jade production, opium production, and teak. Ethnic organizations like the KNU, and SSA taxed trade in such commodities at the Thai border, from where it left Burma for the world markets. Taiwanese and American aid to the Nationalist Chinese forces also continued and even involved reinforcement of the old Nationalist forces from Taiwan in the late 1960s. Chinese support was also provided to the Burmese Communist Party.

Callahan (2003: 223–224) wrote that the main goal of the *Tatmadaw's* Four Cuts policy was to effectively depopulate the border regions by driving villagers into IDP camps inside Burma, or into neighboring Bangladesh or Thailand. Ne Win's *Tatmadaw* launched such operations against the Communists and ethnic armed organizations' operation in

⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOCHR 2023) described operations conducted by the Burmese military in 2021–2023 as being a continuation of Four Cuts doctrine.

1960, but the major operations had been held in the 1970s. His military strategies included the Burmese metaphor: “deny the water to the fish and the buffalo swimming in the pond of water hyacinth,” which became known as people’s war (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 22). That strategy successfully eliminated the Burmese Communist Party (Major General Than Tin 2009), at least temporarily.

The story of the Burmese Communist Party, the main threat to Ne Win’s government from the 1960s until its collapse in 1989, has been well-told by Bertil Linter (1999) in English. The Party survived the deaths of its charismatic founders. A well-known Communist leader (BCP), Thakin Than Tun, died in 1968, and another Communist leader, known as Thakin Soe, surrendered in 1970 (Ministry of Defense, Military History 1994: 88).⁵ The ultimate demise of the BCP though was not due to Four Cuts policies. Rather it was due to a more traditional reason: infighting between factions, and reorganization into new armed “pocket armie”s in 1989. Anti-insurgency policies like Four Cuts did not particularly work in the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, and Afghanistan where the Americans tried them. They did not work well in former British and French colonies either. The only places where they did work were perhaps in Thailand, Malaya, and a few other places where the harshest policies were abandoned, and replaced with large development programs, amnesties, and integration of rebels into the fabric of the nation.

Instead, Ne Win’s military operations targeted civilians living in a rebellious area, reasoning that if there is water, there will be fish. With that tactic, the military relocated many villages to relocation sites; some fled from the military operation to the border areas, and many others to refugee camps on the Thai border.

6.2 THE IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSE FROM THE ETHNICS

6.2.1 *The Uses and Misuses of Ceasefires, 1962–1988*

The Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) launched wars of resistance beginning with the Karen in 1948. But these EAOs did not conduct offensive wars. Rather they waited for the Burmese army to arrive in

⁵ BCP was revived by the mid-1960s with Shan, Kachin, and Chinese support. It collapsed in 1990, and since has been reborn as various Kachin, Wa, and Shan rebel groups.

the highlands before striking. Such “self-defense” wars and restoration of the military government’s political rights broke the Panglong agreement, leading to Ne Win’s insistence on forcible unification. Military governments starting with Ne Win offered peace pacts, but they did so while always seeking a way to eliminate the EAOs.

The quest to eliminate the EAOs was rooted firmly in Ne Win’s nation-building plan which emphasized discipline, unification, sovereignty, and national solidarity. Ne Win’s government collapsed in 1988, but his successors were still military generals from the culture of Myanmar’s military. They modified Ne Win’s Burmese Socialist policies but continued to emphasize Burmanization and military control. As in the past, the combination still did not lead to peace and negotiation in Burma’s politics.

Trust-building efforts between government and ethnic armed organizations did not typically last more than about three years during Ne Win’s time, and it became dogma to the EAOs that the government used peace negotiation as a strategic plan to dilute ethnic armed group activities, and disarm EAOs, rather than seek compromise (Win Tint Tun 2017: 357). It seemed that whenever peace talks were initiated, the government offered verbal promises to build peace, but the status quo deteriorated for the ethnic armed group. It became widely assumed that peace talks were merely military strategies for defeating the Ethnic Armed Organizations.

6.2.2 *Identities: Burmese and Karen Political Counter-Grievance Narratives*

The future Burmese nationalists witnessing King Thibaw’s 1885 capture in Mandalay, and subsequent captivity in India established the Burmese identity. For them, the promotion of Burmese identity started with “Burmeseness” and was in contrast to the Karen, Muslims, Indians, and other plausible identities. Burmeseness was constructed with tangible and intangible artifacts. Historians and Burmese nationalists in colonial times constructed historical facts supporting the Burmeseness as a response to disgust with British rule (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 72–74). As Anderson (1983/1991: 12–22) wrote, the roots of such nationalism come from such cultural roots, including religion and memories of ancient glorious kingdoms.

The intensification of Burmese identity and the reactive ethnicity of the non-Burmese ethnics created new identities which would have

implications beyond independence. The Burmese considered the non-Burmese—especially the Karen, Kachin, and Chin—as British stooges. Thus, *Tatmadaw* nationalists sought to suppress the ethnic Karen, implementing Four Cuts campaigns beginning in the 1960s. The Karen living isolated in the highlands developed counter-narratives which were introduced in the KNU school system, and in the school systems established in the refugee camps in Thailand (see Thako and Waters 2023).

Recall that when Burma Independent Army (BIA) arrived in Burma with the Japanese, they crossed the Thai border and the Karen villages in Hpapun area, where they conducted massacres which today would be judged war crimes. The first massacre occurred in early 1942. They murdered the Karen villagers without mercy (Morrison 1947: 70–71). A second massacre took place in the Myaungmya during the Japanese imperial occupation (Maung Sin Kye 2016: 53). Different narratives also emerged among the Karen and Burmese societies regarding the British colonial times, and Japanese occupation. These narratives underlie the seventy years of civil war in present-day Burma. But as Boulding (2000: 116–122) points out it is not surprising that the two different narratives both support violent culture. The rival narrative between Karen began in colonial times and continues post-independence.

Later, this narrative led to the demand for political rights and recognition of the Karen state. These followed what the Karen viewed as a betrayal by the British for an independent “Karenistan,” massive demonstrations for Karen independence, and the establishment of a formal Karen military independent of the new *Tatmadaw*. There four Karen political demands emerged including:

1. Establish Karen State immediately.
2. No Civil War.
3. No Ethnic Conflict.
4. Show Karen 1 Kyat-Burmese 1 Kyat (political equality between Karen and Burmese).

The fledgling independent Burma was vulnerable to mistrust, armed control, and ethnonationalism. As Ashley South (2008: 37) points out, the militant and secessionist Karen nationalist movement dominated discourse regarding Karen’s place and future in Burma. This Karen liberation movement drew on San C. Poe’s (1928) political narrative of

the Karen people. San C. Poe (1870–1946) was educated by American missionaries in Burma and the United States distrusted the Burmese and anticipating Ne Win's Burmanization policies, said "The Burmese people can never be a great nation, nor can they expect other nations to co-operate with them wholeheartedly unless and until they can eliminate the idea that they are superior in every respect to other nations and races" (San C. Poe, 2001: 19, p. 19). San C. Poe's Karen nationalism emphasized the need for the Karen to live free from Burmese domination and longing for the Karen Country (San C. Poe 2001: 77–84).

The post-independence period with Karen revolution started to demand political rights under the leadership of Karen National Union (KNU). Shortly before he was assassinated on August 12, 1950, by the *Tatmadaw*, Karen leader Saw Bao U Gyi asserted the following nationalistic principles, each of which reflected his view that the British had betrayed the Karen and the Burmese could not be trusted:

1. For us surrender is out of the question.
2. The recognition of Karen State must be completed.
3. We shall retain our arms.
4. We shall decide our own political destiny (Maung Sin Kyae, p. 119).

Such proclamations were dogma among the rebellious Karen in the 1960s–1980s justifying the KNU's fight for self-determination and were a strong rebuttal to government claims to sovereignty.⁶ The demand continues today.

But, the national narrative of the first independent government, that of U Nu, still denounced the KNU as a rebel organization, after fighting between the KNDO and U Nu's government led by the AFPFL party broke out in 1949. However, the AFPFL offered peacetalks with KNU three times. Each time, they did not reach an agreement. The AFPFL requested surrender and collaboration with the KNU. The KNDO

⁶ The Karen as an ethnic group are found in more areas than just the highland Burmese areas, where the KNU is regarded as the legitimate government. However, the majority of the Karen-speaking people still live in Yangon, and farm in the Irrawaddy lowlands. The KNU is weaker in these areas, which include a majority of those self-identifying as Karen. They do not necessarily seek independence from Myanmar like the KNU does, but are acutely aware of discriminatory policies against Karen participation in government and society (See especially Thawngmung 2011).

leaders, KNU's military wing, dismissed this demand, and the civil war started again. After the reply from the KNDO, the government started to open fire again, and the civil war continued, and more grievances were cultivated.⁷

Karen communities were divided into at least two groups: people living in the government control area and people living in the KNU-controlled area. The fear of imprisonment cut the communication between some families. However, Ne Win's military did not achieved the acquiescence they sought, so repeatedly returned to the military means they knew and developed to a high level.

6.2.3 *Other Ethno-nationalist Narratives and the Failure of Federalism: Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and Kachin*

In Chapter 2, we wrote about the types of history. There are

- a. the official national narratives which tend toward hagiography, and
- b. more social histories written by academics, which rely more heavily on archival material, and step back from politics.

The story that the Burmese government created to justify Four Cuts and other policies is clearly the first type. For that matter, so are the ethnic histories that are created in the context of nationalism as expressed in ethnic institutions like the Karen National Union, Kachin Independence Army, and so forth.

Interactions between Bamar and non-Bamar peoples, particularly Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and Kachin were based on a plethora of ethno-nationalist narratives, resulting in parallel political aims and interests (see Gervais and Metro 2012). Bamar leaders from Ne Win's Education Ministry never acknowledged the counter-narratives and pointed only to assimilation policies. But of course, the Karen, Kachin, Mon, Chin, Shan, and

⁷ Ne Win's military was equipped developed counter-insurgency methods to eliminate the KNU, and a narrative to rationalize the policy. The most widely used method was the Four Cuts strategy. Ne Win's army launched the Four-Cuts strategy in the KNU controlled areas in the late 1960s. That dominant strategy was presented in the 1968 *Tatmadaw* conference (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 25). After applying that strategy in the Karen occupied areas, Ne Win's military announced their success in the ethnic area (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 32). The impact of using the four-cuts strategy caused Internally Displaced People, Refugee, Land Grabbing, Ethnic Cleansing, etc.

others non-Bamar refused to recognize the Bamar authorities' identification of them as people with common origins with the Bamar, created as "separate" by the British.

The Shan princes whose ancestors arrived in northern Burma about the same time the Burmese arrived, remembered themselves as a great Buddhist civilization, which balanced loyalties at different times between great powers from Mandalay (Burma), Chiangmai (Thailand), Ayudhaya and Bangkok (Thailand), and southern China. In Shan historical traditions, they were not necessarily the content subjects of the Bamar monarchs, which is how the Burmese remembered them.

As for the Karen, Kachin, Chin, Mon, and others, they viewed themselves as indigenous, having arrived before the Burmese intruded from the north in the tenth century CE. In their view, these non-Bamar peoples had a culture that the Bamar rulers absorbed, both in terms of governance and Buddhism.⁸

The Bamar, on the other hand, outnumber non-Bamars, resulting in their political strength in the modern era. These opposing narratives increased the tension between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups after independence, particularly in a democratic world, where ethnic identity is equated with votes; the Bamar with over 60% of the population saw themselves as the rightful majority with a right to rule. Bamar leaders lost confidence in non-Bamar ethnic groups during World War II and vice versa.⁹

Still, the division was not inevitable. The divided politics of the Burmese and non-Burmese were not apparent in the beginning when

⁸ In the case of the Karen, Alwyn (2021) points out that Karen origin stories describe how the Burmese appropriated an ancient Karen writing system, and that the Shwe Dagon pagoda in Yanton has origins in early Karen Buddhism, and construction was completed hundreds of years after construction began by enslaved Karen labor used by Burmese masters.

⁹ The British had armed some non-Burmese ethnic military units with their ethnic title: King's Karen Rifles,

King's Kachin Rifles, and the King's Chin Rifles. They retreated with the British, and they deployed again in Burma to battle with the Japanese. Some British officers promised ethnic allies such as Karen, their independence. The Karen, as a group, had hoped for Independence. Thus, they held their positions on a self-autonomy and independent state (Dun 1980: 70–79). The Kachin, Chin, and the federated Shan State, under the British rule, also had their own political territory (U Kyaw 2007: 19–20). Karenni was standing as an independent state, which was not even part of the British Burma (Woodman 1962: 206).

there was great excitement about independence. The Burmese leader, General Aung San, persuaded the ethnic leaders to unite for independence. Aung San's wanted a united people to attain independence and began to create a new narrative for reflecting what can only be called a moral imagination by reframing old enmities (Lederach 2005: 13–19; 1999). Aung San's definition of "Race and Nation" was mentioned in his speech in preparing the PaSaPaLa (ပာဆာပါလာ) AFPFL Conference in 1947. Aung San thought other ethnic people could not build their own states, and the only thing was to collaborate with the Burmese.¹⁰

All seemed to agree with the principle of federalism at the time of Panglong, as the Chin leader Lian H. Sakhong (2010: 14–122) makes clear. However, in 1962, Ne Win still used as a reason to conduct his coup to end all such discussions, claiming that federalism was a threat to national unity. Ethnic armed organizations emerged from the catastrophe of the coup to resist the centralization of power in the hands of the military.

The Mon restarted the revolution with Mon National Defense Organization in 1949, later changing its name to the New Mon State Party (NMSP). NMSP later allied with other ethnic armed organizations to resist the Ne Win army with its Burmanization program (Nai Pan Tha 2014: 161–197). Mon politicians fought to revive the federal principle proposed in Panglong Conference, from which they wanted to build the nation with federal values (Nai Ngwe Thein 2015: 113). Mon also sought recognition of their identity and believed that their autonomy was justified as the heirs to the ancient Mon kingdom which had brought Buddhism to Burma. The Mon believe that the Bamar had destroyed their kingdom and their polity in 1757, a tyranny from which they were released by the initial British conquest of their homeland in 1825, and the final British conquest of Burma in 1886. Mon national celebrated a national day which

¹⁰ Aung San assumed that the unification of all people in Burma was a call to shared nationhood (Aung San 2013: 452–453). Aung San even asserted that secession was a seemingly natural and political right (See Sakhong 2010:18). The Kachin, Shan, Chin, and Karenni leaders agreed to seek Independence together, as did the Burmese, which is why they all signed the Panglong agreement for independence. Left out were the Karen, who boycotted the meeting in Panglong.⁸ See Mon New Agency, Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2019.

assumes their kingdoms were established in AD 573. Juajan Wongpol-ganan (2007: 59) argued that Mon national created their cultural identity as a vision for self-determination.¹¹

Rakhine was also a marginal area dominated by Burma for only a short time before the arrival of the British in after the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824–1825. They too resisted Ne Win's Burmanization program, even though the Rakhine and Burmese have mutually intelligible languages. The Rakhine remember also suffering under Burmese monarchical rule; the oppressions of the Burmese kings are central in their narratives. Indeed, Burmese kings invaded Rakhine repeatedly, and conquered it finally only in 1784, a situation which was then reversed by British colonization in 1824–1825 (U Myint Saw 2018: 81–82). British rule continued until 1948.

The Rakhine leaders agreed to federalism in 1948 only as a way to bring autonomy and peace (Aye Thar Aung 2016: 174). In the context of Ne Win Burmanization policies of the 1960s, became impossible. The post-2021 rebel Arakan Army is among the strongest in Myanmar today. The new generation presumably prefers to have their own Rakhine army to save their nation (Maung Maung Soe 2020: 14–20). After a decade-long civil war between Arakan Army and Burmese *Tatmadaw*, Major General Tun Myat Naing, Arakan Army (AA) commander in chief, concluded, “We prefer [a confederation of state] like Wa state, which has a large share of power in line with the Constitution. And we think it is more appropriate to the history of Rakhine state and the hopes of the Arakanese people” (Nan Lwin Hnint Pwint 2019).

The Chin people live in the western part of Burma, near India. Their narratives emphasize their service with the British Army throughout the British colonial period. The British recognized the Chin of the King's Chin Rifles, such as Won Thu Maung as particularly noteworthy. After independence, unlike the Karen, they became soldiers of the Burma Army and assisted the new Burmese government.

The Chin languages officially include more than fifty dialects. Many became Christian and a Christian education system was developed. The result was that their state was the least developed in post-1962 Myanmar. They were disappointed when the Burmese did not give them federal rights, and they formed their own army, The Chin National Front (CNF)

¹¹ See South 2003 *Mon Nationalism and Civil War* (Routledge) for a comprehensive account of Mon nationalism and revolt.

which took up arms against the *Tatmadaw* in 1988. Thomas Tang No (2013: 109) asserted that Chin needed their own army to resist the Burmese army.¹²

6.2.4 *The Victory of the Drug Traders*

Ne Win would rule personally for 26 years. During that time, the Burmese economy retreated from the world stage, and as foreign researchers repeatedly noted, became one of the poorest in Asia and the world. Politically the Burmese Way to Socialism was ridiculed internationally, while also becoming embedded in an isolated Burmanized population which grew ever-fearful of outsiders.

As Ne Win's supporters contended, this meant that the country never experienced the catastrophes of the post-colonial wars in Indochina, the massacres in Indonesia, the calamitous collapse of India at independence, or the misery of the Bangladeshi Revolution in 1971–1972. But it also created an isolated and fearful pariah state never able to achieve any of its ambitious social and political goals, as it remained under the harsh rule of the highly centralized military government. Pariah status though was to be used as a response to the economic malaise in a strange way. Myanmar would become one of the most important sources of illicit opiate and methamphetamine production.

There was a strange kind of economic success in the north, which was in the rapid expansion of the economy and that was in the trade in opiates,

¹² The various ethnic armed organizations and Burmese politicians organized the meeting to set the political agenda to resist the Four Cuts operations in highland regions—thus formed an alliance known as Democratic Alliance (MaDaTa) in 1976. There were thirteen revolutionary groups in MaDaTa, from various ethnic armed groups in Burma. Ma Da Ta's purpose was to build a federal system (Aung Saw Oo 2018: 536). That Democratic Alliance coordinated with the military and political affairs. Thus, they planned to achieve their goal through the Manerplaw Agreement negotiated between ethnic rebel groups in 1992 at their capital Manerplaw, in Karen State on the Thai border. There was six-part road map in that agreement to eliminate Burmanization (Aung Naing Oo 2016: 594).

Little became of this agreement though, and Manerplaw, the headquarters of the group, was destroyed by the Burmese military in 1995. Even though the government changed, Ne Win Burmanization still survived. Ne Win built the Burmanization system to endure. In the same way that the German bureaucracy survived the dismissal of its creator Prince Otto von Bismarck, Burmanization has survived the fall of Ne Win (see Waters and Waters 2015: 60).

heroin, and methamphetamine. Production of illicit products soared in both Burma and Afghanistan, despite American efforts to combat drug production. And each internal political crisis seemed to result in a further expansion. Ne Win's 1962 coup led to aggressive attacks against rebels, and in turn, the expansion of poppy fields, and the creation of new heroin production labs. A major market of course was Vietnam where it was believed 10% of the US soldiers used heroin.¹³ The attempts of the DEA to control the drug trade led to the dubious honor of US indictments Khun Sa and Lo Hsing Han for drug dealing. In the early 1990s, Lo was the "Godfather of Heroin," as the wanted posters put it.

The indictments though were never served, despite decades of cooperation between the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and the military government in Yangon. In the end, both Khun Sa and Lo Hsing Han died after long quiet Yangon retirements.

Chaos in the 1990s led to the establishment of methamphetamine labs in the places where opium and heroin production earlier had been so important. The pills spilled out of Myanmar feeding illicit markets wherever they appeared. The drug itself also funded new opposition to the Tatmadaw which, when not sponsoring drug smuggling itself, fought northern separatists and "drug dealers" for control of territory. The United States in particular became involved in these efforts, supporting the regime with helicopters, arms, and DEA agents.¹⁴

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¹³ See *The Economist* obituary for Lo Hsing Han, July 27, 2013.

¹⁴ There is a provocative 1991 picture of DEA agent Bruce Stubbs posing with the man the US also accused of being a major organizer of the heroin trade, Lo Hsing Han. They are posing in front of a US donated Bell helicopter. Stubbs was also a US Coast Guard Officer and went on to become Secretary of the Navy in the Obama administration. In a 2007-obituary in the Bangkok Post, an anonymous US official said of Lo, "Some days I almost admire this son of a bitch."

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Ne Win's Policies After Ne Win (1988–2020) and Saw Eh Htoo's Hopes

If the army shoots, it hits, there is no shooting in the air.—Ne Win 1988

7.1 NE WIN'S EXIT, AND AFTER

7.1.1 *Ne Win's Strange "Exit"*

Burma was tired by 1987. Ne Win and his military government had been in power for 25 years, and in the process transformed the center of the country into a fearful police state. Fear worked; even the university students were quiet since at least 1976 when protests had last happened, on the 100th anniversary of the writer Thakin Kodaw Hmaing. Or so it seemed.

The highland areas were much as they had been in the past: rural areas in revolt, and frequent clashes with soldiers conducting Four Cuts operations. The poppy crop had propelled northern Burma into being a major source of heroin and disorder, at least from the perspective of the developed world. In Western Burma, Mon and Karen forces continued as before, building pseudo governments, fielding armies, and resisting incursions from the government. Communists, Kachin, Shan, and drug lords with their pocket armies and support from China and the United States continued to control much of the north.

But for the rest of the world, the bigger story was the continuing strangeness of General Ne Win and his regime. In its struggle with the world, the regime isolated itself behind its fearsome police apparatus.

Contact with foreigners was limited. Trade was monopolized by the deteriorating para-statal companies owned by the Ministries, which in turn were staffed by crony generals. Opium was probably the biggest export. Teak, exported through Thailand was another big export. Gems, and especially jade, would be mined and make their way abroad via Thailand and China. Rice was no longer grown for export as it had been when Burma was one of the world's greatest rice exporters in the 1930s. The Burmese economy was in decline. The generals were embarrassed when the UN classified Burma in 1987 as a "Least Developed Country" along with neighboring Bangladesh, a very few other Asian countries, and much of Africa. The isolation contributed to the further Burmanization of the country. The schools with their slogans and texts continued to operate, the entertainment industry pumped out films, songs, and newspapers glorifying the Burmese Road to Socialism (see e.g. Ferguson 2007). But not all was well.

In 1985, Ne win had precipitously ordered the withdrawal of the 100 kyat notes from circulation, and then replaced them with 25, 35, and 75 Kyat notes. Then on September 5, 1987, even more precipitously, the strangely denominated notes were instantly demonetized, and made worthless. New 45 and 90 kyat notes were issued, presumably because 9 was General Ne Win's lucky number. Spontaneous demonstrations against the regime began to occur). About 300 Rangoon Institute of Technology students spontaneously demonstrated and rioted that day, provoking a harsh crackdown. But in coming months, the frustration spread, and the demonstrations escalated. The response by the feared police escalated even more, and in March 1988, marching students were shot and killed at a tea house. Others were clubbed to death as they marched in opposition to the regime. On 18 March, 42 died from beatings and suffocation (Lintner 1999: 338–340).

On the July 23, 1988, Ne Win surprised the country by announcing his own resignation as Char of the BSPP. But it also became clear that he was not giving up power—he appointed as his replacement General Sein Lwin, his lieutenant from the 4th Burma Rifles who was widely believed to have personally executed the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi, and organized the shooting of students at the University of Rangoon in 1962. Ne Win made clear in his resignation speech that he was still in control, ominously saying, "I want the entire nation, the people, to know that if in the future there are mob disturbances, if the army shoots, it hits—there is no firing in the air to scare" (Lintner 1999: 341). Civil Society responded by calling

a General Strike for August 8, 1988, a numerologically auspicious day, 8.8.88. Work at factories, government, and across the country came to a halt. Crowds poured onto the streets of Rangoon centered around Sule Pagoda. Crowds gathered in provincial cities as well, and then at 11 p.m. after the largest crowds dispersed, soldiers began shooting into the crowd, creating panic and death. Over the next days, soldiers attacked other striking sites, including a hospital. Then on August 13, 1988, General Sein Lwin resigned, and Dr. Maung Maung, Ne Win's favorite academic, was appointed to replace him. The peaceful demonstrations continued, but without the violent reactions from the army.

The next turning point came on August 25, when the daughter of the slain Aung San appeared at a demonstration at Shwedagon Pagoda. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was little known at that point, having spent much of the previous decades in India and the UK where she married a British academic, and raised two sons. She returned only in recent months to Burma to tend to her ailing mother, the widow of Aung San, without any particular thought of becoming a political figure. But then she arrived at Shwe Dagon on August 25, 1988, and things would change for both her, and Burma's politics (Lintner 1999: 348–357; Myat 2019; Zöllner and Ebbighausen 2018: 71–80).

Her speech electrified the crowd, and Burma seemed on the cusp of what she called a “second revolution,” especially after 6 September, 1988, when nine of the 11 surviving members of the “30 comrades” denounced Ne Win, and called on the army to support the demonstrators (Lintner 1999: 346). What was at that time the largest of the “people power” demonstrations in Asia seemed successful—but it was not to be that simple, and the feeling lasted no more than a few days.

There were more shootings of demonstrators, and students and others fled to the border regions, and Thailand. Maung Maung was deposed after one month, and General Saw Maung ordered the army to shoot into crowds again. Between 3,000 and 10,000 were killed between March and September 1988.

7.1.2 *Aung San Suu Kyi, 8.8.88, and More Military Rule*

In the end, the military coup was one in which the military simply replaced itself, but the opposition still took on a new life. In Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, there was a leader, and a new party, which could draw on its relationship to founder General Aung San. The new National League

for Democracy (NLD), emerged under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi as General Secretary, and Ne Win's old lieutenant, General Aung Gyi, who was fired in the 1960s, as Chair. Other new parties also emerged to challenge the government, even one created by the octogenarian U Nu. Meanwhile in the north, the Communist Party of Burma went on offensives, capturing towns in Shan State. The response of the military was brutal, with fighting and massacres occurring in rebellious areas of the country.

7.1.2.1 The Emergence of SLORC

Parliament was closed, Dr. Maung Maung retired after just one month in office, and the government was reorganized under the command of a new military council, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which General Saw Maung dominated. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest on July 20, 1989, at which point the military agreed to a contested election in 1990 with international observers. As in 1960, the military parties were defeated. The NLD led by the imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi easily won an open election, but their counselors were never seated in Parliament. Instead, SLORC in the name of national security, reinstated the power of the army and police, and began military offensives in the hills of Burma. A number of these offensives were from the SLORC's perspective successful. The CPB collapsed in March–April 1989 due to infighting, and in 1995, the Karen capital at Manerplaw on the Thai border would fall. The costs for the people were high. Besides the deaths, IDPs were created, and hundreds of thousands of refugees would flee to Thailand and Bangladesh in the 1990s.

7.1.2.2 SLORC and Ceasefires for All

In 1988, Ne Win stepped aside from his formal positions, but stayed behind the scenes while his military maintained and, in fact, tightened control. In between, there was of course the massive people power demonstrations of 1988, but these ended in a bloody crackdown, midnight arrests, and a refilling of the cells of Insein prison. The 1990 election resulted in a victory for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, but this result was ignored by military leaders who harshly cracked down. The United States and its allies began responding with trade sanctions, isolating Myanmar further from the world.

Ne Win too was still in the background whether via the ruling officers who respected his leadership and reproduced his philosophy of rule, and also because he set bureaucratic habits in motion which kept his values in place. Even after his death in 2002, the society he built on the same three principles of Burmanization: Burmese culture, Buddhism, and centralized military dominance persisted. The Burmese Way to Socialism was eliminated as a formal policy, but its spirit lived on.

The Burmese Road to Socialism's original model was a one-party system with centralized government was little changed by Ne Win's immediate successors. The essential notion of Ne Win Burmanization was preserved and even expanded upon. This seemingly happened out of habit but even among military officers, there was an awareness that reform was coming. In this context, the new military generation strove to adapt to the new American-centric post-Cold War world political order and improve its political system, even though this inherently incompatible with the Burmanized military rule. New actors and political ideologies modified and challenged the old system in this new world order, as well as in the context of Burma.

Under the post-1988 military regimes, there would inevitably be tensions, particularly in the context of the events of the 1990s and 2000s. The university again erupted in protests in 1997 which were put down harshly. There was a cosmetic shift in army personnel as the SLORC regime, which gave way to the SPDC with the assistance of American public relations firm (see Lintner 1999: 419–420). Travel into border areas particularly those in revolt was monitored and people found in the wrong place disappeared from busses never to be seen again.

The SLORC under General Saw Maung formed a peace group led by General Khin Nyunt, long time head of the police, and founder of the Department of Anthropology at Yangon University where Saw Eh Htoo studied (Khin Nyunt also was former General Ne Win's bodyguard). As a result, at least sixteen EAOs including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Mon groups, Remnants of student groups (ABSDF), and the Southern Shan Army (SSA), signed ceasefire agreements with SPDC. (Win Tint Tun 2014: 557, and 2017). Conditions proposed typically involved the disarmament of the rebels, without a reciprocal commitment from the army. The conditions were spelled out as follows,

1. To forego armed struggle in favor of surrendering under the authority of the government
2. Allocation of Troops for a Temporary Ceasefire
3. Cooperation in regional development
4. To attend a national political convention.
5. It's time to put down the guns for good and form a political party once the Constitution is finished (Yan Kyaw 2017: 49).

Khin Nyunt persuaded ethnic leaders to engage in trade in the name of development, even as rebel armies collapsed. Cynics claimed that the point of the Khin Nyunt's 1990 ceasefire plan was to turn surviving enemies into cronies using a sort of ceasefire capitalism which betrayed the needs of the people (Wood 2017: 27). Bags of cash, a technique long a staple of counterinsurgency operations fragmented the opposition. The SLORC, renamed a less ominous sounding SPDC signed peace treaty in the 1990s with the Communists, Kachin Independence Army, and Mon Army. Bribed ethnic leaders did little to address actual political grievances. Political grievances instead led to the formation of new ethnic armed groups, balancing their own nationalist goals, even as some ethnic leaders are caught up in the SPDC's plan.

But in fact, the SPDC's overall policy of peace was short-lived. The KIA who signed a peace treaty in the 1990s, resurrected their violent rebellion in 2011. The Peace agreements with the Wa and Mon would last longer; in the case of the Wa it persisted due to the defacto annexation of the Wa State by China. Political grievances led to the formation of new ethnic armed groups, such as the Arakan Army, while others came and went. Karen and other groups were defeated at their capital in Manerplaw in 1995, swelling Thai refugee camps. At the center was the SLORC and its successor the SPDC which from the safety of Yangon and Naypyitaw would continue to dominate the country, without ever really achieving a total victory.¹

¹ See Lintner (2022) for a more general discussion of the ceasefires of the 1990s between the SLORC, and the Ethnic Armed Organizations.

7.1.2.3 *The Election of 1990 and Freedom from Fear*

Far from the anarchic highlands of the north, and along the Western border with Thailand, the military in 1990 organized the first relatively free election since 1960 in 1990. The military established their own party, and permitted Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD to field a full slate of candidates. And then just as in 1960, the military was easily defeated by civilian politicians who had the support of a population long tired of the arbitrary cruel rule of military officers. NLD succeeded with 60% of the popular vote, with the remainder awarded to the military's National Unity Party (21%), and a large number of small ethnic-based parties. The military government simply annulled the results, and continued to rule they said, on the basis of their recognition by the UN. Opposition who complained were arrested and imprisoned. Aung San Suu Kyi was already under arrest, and remained in confinement in a mix of prison, and house arrest which would continue for most of the period until 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi, her husband Dr. Michael Aris soon began releasing her writings which emphasized the importance of nonviolence as a means for ending the military dictatorship. Inspired by Gandhi and others, these writings attracted the attention of the Nobel Committee, and in 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while in captivity. In 1995–1996 she was permitted to meet crowds of supporters through the iron bars of the gate to her house; her “talks at the gate” were reported widely among the Bamar population via non-official means (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991; Zöllner 1996/2014; Myat 2019).

Aung San Suu Kyi's talks were philosophical discussions about the nature of Burma, dictatorship, good governance, and what was Aung San Suu Kyi's key theme, fear. Implicit was Buddhism and *Metta* loving kindness, and was the avoidance of hatred and fear (Zöllner 1996/2014: 222). The talks at the gate involved the give and take of dialog between the fencebars that separated Aung San Suu Kyi from the crowd of hundreds which gathered each week, and emphasized the importance of nonviolent resistance against the injustices of the regime.

Aung San Suu Kyi's 1990 essay “Freedom from Fear” was part of the reason she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Her essay was also an important contribution for understanding the nature of oppression in the context of military rule. Her point was that oppression is only possible in the anticipation of looming disaster—and that tyranny thrives on the anticipation of such disaster. Fear she wrote, is what had given Ne Win and his army power over the population since 1962. The only way to

defeat the army, she reasoned, was to refuse to be afraid. As indeed the millions who turned onto the streets in August 1988 and after were not afraid.

But this was not enough, since for much of 1988 to 2011 Aung San Suu Kyi herself was under house arrest, and the police state of SLORC and SPC expanded. As she wrote, they did so by creating the feeling, or illusion, that the state was always watching, even in tea houses where people stopped speaking openly, and everyone was afraid of everyone else. As a result, circles of trust shrank to the few family or close friends who were trusted to not be informants, except when they were. Fear of betrayal in the police state was constant, as police officers trained in divide and conquer techniques created the belief that if an ill word was said, the police would know, arrive in the middle of the night to arrest and disappear a person, or even an entire family. The fear was so pervasive that mothers and fathers could no longer follow the fate of their children, and only retreat fearfully into their own minds and anxieties.

The irony of course was that, as Aung San Suu Kyi wrote, was that this happened in a population which in August 1988 fearlessly went onto the street time and time again, despite the mass shootings and arrests.

7.1.2.4 Western Sanctions and Sanctions Busting

After 1988, the renamed country of Myanmar itself fearfully retreated further into isolation from the outside world. China remained an untrusted colossus to the north, and it confirmed suspicions by supporting rebel groups in Wa State, Kachin State, and elsewhere and thereby nibbling away at the territory The SPDC actually controlled. This happened, even as China remained a source of arms for the SLORC/SPDC governments.

The West, still hurt by Ne Win's nationalizations of the 1960s, saw Myanmar as a pariah state, with an abominable human rights record, and hostility to business. The United States also had an interest in controlling drugs, and supplied weapons and even helicopters to the military government. They did this even while also encouraging support for ethnic Karen and Shan forces which had carved out independent areas in the eastern part of the country. Support for these groups came from the DEA, the Christian churches who supported the Karen Baptists, USAID, and undoubtedly the CIA. Aid went both to the military government, often in the form of military hardware supplied to the central government in the name of America's War on Drugs, and US-favored EAOs which received

cross-border money from churches, the DEA, State Department directed funds, and USAID.

Publicly of course, the main focus of The United States and its allies were on sanctions against the military regime. But there was little trade between the United States and Myanmar in the first place, and in retrospect, this probably had little effect on the military which reveled in its international isolation, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Drugs, teak, and gems could all be exported surreptitiously through China, and Thailand whose own military government continued to maintain close relations with the military counterparts in Myanmar, even as that country too permitted EAOs to maintain Thai bases. In other words, China, the US, and Thailand each played off Burma's internal fears.

7.1.2.5 *Saffron Revolution*

In 2007 that cracks in the totalitarian playbook though reappeared. Even in isolation, Burma was affected by global economic trends, particularly inflation. Likewise, Myanmar had declined to become one of the twenty poorest countries in the world, even as a few military families grew rich. To balance the financial books, the government removed fuel subsidies, causing fuel prices to spike. Urban consumers began to timidly protest. The government was unable to completely control these protests, and soon they spread. Most importantly, the conservative Buddhist monkhood began to push to the forefront of the protests, leading to photos giving the impression that the saffron-robed monks were the main organizers. As in 1988, the protests were widespread. And as in 1988, the military attempted a violent crackdown. Whereas in 1988, thousands probably died, death tolls in 2007 were much lower, but suppression was still effective.

Behind the protests though were pressures on the SPDC to reform, in order to stop the economic and political slide. As a compromise, the military agreed to finally sponsor a Constitutional Convention to replace the dictatorial SPDC rule, and then sponsor a referendum on the situation. The idea was that the Constitution would provide an explicit basis for a form of democratic rule which would also protect the role of the military in politics indefinitely.

7.1.3 *The New Constitution and Hurricane Nargis*

The new Constitution was drawn up by the military government. At the center was a guarantee that the military would seat 25% of the Parliamentary seats, and always be allowed to appoint the Ministers for Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. Other ministries would potentially be allocated democratically to any party which received the most seats in Parliamentary elections.

Missing from the Constitution was mention of federalism, and a specific assumption that control would continue from the center from the new capital in Naypyitaw. Also kept was the strong focus on the preservation on national sovereignty, the use of Burmese as the sole official language, and the sacred integrity of the territory inherited from British Burma. A clause was also included that required that the President not have any foreign spouse or children, a clause inserted to prevent Aung San Suu Kyi becoming president.

This document was then put to a test, and the election scheduled for May 10, 2008. The election was held despite the landfall on May 2, of Typhoon Nargis, which would kill 130,000 in the Irrawaddy River Delta, and displace millions more. In a nod to this catastrophe, the military junta permitted the government to be delayed two weeks in the Irrawaddy River Delta. Improbably, 98% of voters were reported to have turned out, and 92% voted in favor.

7.1.4 *Elections and the Return of the International Community and Liberal Values*

The new 2008 Constitution was an attempt to maintain control, while also opening the company up for international assistance. In other words, there was a nod to liberal principles regarding democratic rule, while assuming that the military would indefinitely control the country via an officer corp, who were the heirs of Ne Win. It also preserved the centralized nature of the government; Home Affairs Ministry would continue to appoint all governors of the states and regions. The products of Burmanization were also retained. Burmese was the sole official language, Buddhism the official religion (while permitting religious freedom) and of course sovereignty of existing borders was maintained. Censorship continued. There was no modification in citizenship law, which meant that the Muslim Rohingya minority continued to be excluded.

The most important clause from a political perspective was the requirement that any person elected President of the Republic not have any relatives who were not Burmese. This was included in order to exclude the Aung San Suu Kyi from the Presidency, should the NLD be victorious in any election as it had been in 1990.

Despite the questionable circumstances under which the new Constitution was adopted, the military began conducting open elections. The first was in 2010, and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD refused to participate, so long as so many of their leaders remained under arrest. The USDP military party won with 57%, and a turnout of 77%, despite the election being canceled in a number of ethnic areas due to insurgency. Surprisingly the previous military dictator General Than Shwe, a hardliner, stepped down in favor of General Thein Sein, who would turn out to be more liberal. Aung San Suu Kyi was also released from house arrest after the election in 2011, and immediately began campaigning for the next elections.

General Thein Sein permitted the conduct of by-elections for 45 seats in both houses of Parliament in 2012 which the NLD participated, and won in what was generally agreed to be a fair election. The NLD contested and won 4 seats in the upper house of nationalities, and 37 in the lower house of parliament. Aung San Suu Kyi herself was seated in the lower house of Parliament as the leader of a Parliamentary opposition with the 37 seats that the party won. In this first test in an election, the victory of the NLD was overwhelming, showing that the population had not lost enthusiasm for the party since the previous election it contested, in 1990.

As significant, General Thein Sein opened Myanmar to foreign investment, and aid. The Norwegians in particular stepped in, coordinating peace talks between the military government, and 15 Ethnic Armed Organizations. This was to result in the signing of a multiparty cease fire in October 2015 with participation from major Karen groups which had up to that time refused.

7.1.5 Norwegian Style Ceasefires, Open Elections, and the Persistence of Burmanization

In October, 2015, a “nationwide” ceasefire was declared after eight of the fifteen groups negotiating with the government simultaneously reached an agreement. Most importantly, the KNU and KIA, which both controlled territory, and consistently fielded armies, signed. Joint

Peace Commission offices including offices for the EAOs were opened in Yangon and Naypyitaw to monitor compliance with the agreements, with the assumption that the federal system of government that the Ethnic Armed Organizations wanted would be developed, despite the fact there was no such provision in the 2008 Constitution. Funding was provided via an internationally funded and coordinated “Joint Peace Fund” which paid for workshops, experts, peace conferences, offices, and trips around the world for Myanmar’s negotiators. Soon they were being spirited from Yangon’s conference centers to observe peacebuilding in places like Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and Colombia. The euphoria of the successful ceasefire negotiations was quickly followed in November 2015 by the second general election conducted under the 2008 Constitution, and the first general election in which NLD contested since 1990. The NLD won resoundingly, presenting General Thein Sein with the need to step down, and cede power to a new President. The election also meant that NLD needed to find a role for their *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi who has not eligible to be president because her sons were British. The extra-constitutional position of “State Counselor” was created for her, in addition to her appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs. This government was successfully seated in February 2016 (Zöllner and Ebbighausen 2018: 161–168).

The international community proclaimed that Myanmar was a miracle because it had become democratic in record time. Offices were opened in Yangon, and large rents paid to the generals who owned the houses by the arriving expatriate diplomats and peacebuilders. Yangon’s skyline also grew rapidly, as Chinese, Singaporean, and other companies rushed in to seek profits from Myanmar’s rapidly growing economy. After the elections, Yangon was developing one of the freest presses in southeast Asia. Myanmar was also briefly one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The Myanmar economy grew at a rate of 7% in 2016, an all-time high for Myanmar, giving donors hope that soon Myanmar would grow like China, India, and the other emerging Southeast Asian economic powers (see e.g. Thawngmunh and Eh Htoo 2021).

7.1.6 *The NLD-Military Government and the Rohingya*

But the honeymoon between the NLD and the world community did not last long. And it would founder on a legacy of Ne Win, and Burmanization, of the Rohingya. The Rohingya had long been persecuted as foreigners by succeeding military governments. Purges occurred in 1978, 1992, and 2012, in which hundreds of thousands were pushed into Bangladesh. The Rohingya were the descendants of decades and centuries-old migrations from what is today Bengal into what is today India and Bangladesh. Most were peasant farmers, and Muslim. All were from the perspective of the *Maha Bamar* Burmanization philosophy foreigners, with no right to stay in Myanmar.

In August 2017, the Burmese Army was attacked by a small group of Muslim radicals. The response of the Burmese military was massive. The army invaded the region, pushing 700,000 to 900,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh where they were housed in coastal refugee camps funded by the UNHCR. Western allies of the NLD were appalled, and quickly blamed their NLD allies for not intervening to stop what soon was labeled a genocide.

Relations between Aung San Suu Kyi and her Western allies soured quickly. Caught between the liberal Western goals of the NLD's Western patrons, and the xenophobia of her Burmanized power base, she chose the Burmese. The enthusiasm of the Western sponsors quickly evaporated, and she began looking for other allies to help her balance against the generals who had never quite trusted her. Eventually, she began courting China in her role as State Counselor, where she was treated as head of state. But this too was a step too far for the generals, who inherited suspicions about Chinese as a result of their wars on the northern border with the Burmese Communist Party, and its Chinese sponsors.

And then of course in March 2020, the global lockdown for COVID began. Myanmar's migrant workers were sent back home from Thailand, China, and elsewhere. Tensions rose.

At a new general election in November 2020, and NLD was again endorsed by the voters. This was the final step for the generals, who declared the election to be fraudulent, and on the morning of February 1, 2021, the day the new NLD-led Parliament was to be inaugurated, set in motion a coup by arresting, Aung San Suu Kyi, her government, and all new members of Parliament.

7.1.7 *The February 1, 2021, Coup and the Return of Fear*

I (Tony) woke up in California on February 1, 2021, with and was immediately glued to my Facebook feed with news of the Myanmar coup. But I was talking with Saw Eh Htoo again about his dissertation by February 7, and with other students and colleagues in Yangon as well. Via the miracle of modern communication, I had an electronic connection with the demonstrations, military aggression, and the need to flee. Saw Eh Htoo himself moved between safehouses, trying to figure out whether he was on any blacklists due to his previous work with peacebuilding INGOs. He was worried that his previous prominence within the INGO community, which included contracts with UKAID, KNU, Rohingya, and others meant he was on a black list of some sort.

At some point, Eh Htoo began to feel more secure, and returned to work finishing his INGO contracts, and working on his dissertation. He had a terrible bout of COVID in July 2021, and a few months after was diagnosed with cancer. Still he continued his work, seeking treatment from the Yangon hospitals where the doctors were on strike against the coup. He continued to resist the urging of friends and family to seek treatment in Bangkok.

My last communication via Signal with him was on May 2, 2022. With others of course communication continues until this day. Myanmar is not the isolated country it was during the 1990s when SLORC controlled information more tightly. My contacts in Myanmar I remember as good and kind people. But the war is doing much to them. They now look forward to the deaths of soldiers, and welcome the sounds of bombs at the police stations.

In short there is a return to the irrationalism of fear. And as Aung San Suu Kyi wrote in “Freedom from Fear” such fear corrupts judgment, and makes the trust that underpins nation-building impossible. And this is where we are in 2023. Looking for ways to hope. Before he passed away, Saw Eh Htoo wrote about his hopes, and why he believed peacebuilding was still needed in Myanmar.

7.2 SAW EH HTOO'S HOPES

7.2.1 *Political Agency and the Peacebuilding Vision, 2022*

Burma's politics has for seventy years sought peace. But the ultimate solution to ending the ethnic wars and reaching a political settlement is still elusive. Our point is that Burmanization is the core cause of today's Burma crisis. Burmanization began with Burmese nationalism, but it was Ne Win who formalized it within the government structure. Then, to construct the nation, he adopted a forced unification/assimilation scheme. Ne Win believed that superior Burmese principles arose during the monarchy, based in an ethnicized hierarchy. He believed there were established divisions between the "civilized" populations at the center and the "backward" groups at the periphery (Kymlicka 2005: 89). The Bamar people were habituated to Ne Win's views, and this habituation continues today.

In Burmese politics there are four distinct communities to balance, all of whom have themselves been habituated to Ne Win's formulas, or are reacting to Ne Win's formula.

These groups are the following. Each has a different view on peacebuilding.

1. Pro-military government perspective on peacebuilding.
2. Democratic Alliance's perspective on peacebuilding.
3. Ethnic Armed Organizations' perspective on peacebuilding.
4. Young civilians' perspective on peacebuilding.

Members of the groups may share similar ideologies with each other, but not across boundaries. They also have their own vision for peacebuilding that emerges from their predispositions, and *habitus*.

The first three groups represented the old entrenched school of thought steeped in Ne Win's Burmanization heritage. The final group is a new generation born in the digital age who do not identify with their elders. They are Saw Eh Htoo's hope.

7.2.1.1 *Pro-military Government's Perspective on Peacebuilding*

"The three causes of military doctrine" are practiced by the pro-military government. The first of these three explanations is a reference to historical kingdoms that once existed (Maung Aung Myoe 2009:3). They were known as:

1. "The armed royal state" (*Le Net Nainggan Taw*). The only way they could unite the ancient city-state was through hard power politics, which is pertinent to their slogan,
2. "We will have a strong nation if we have a powerful *Tatmadaw*" (*Tatmadaw Inarr Shi Ma, Taing Pyi Inarr Shi Me*).
3. The *Tatmadaw* state emphatically that they had never betrayed the national interest (*Tatmadaw the Amyothar Yey Koh Bae Tawt Ma Thitsar Ma Poak*).

Each of these are assumed to be in the national interest. This view assumes that Myanmar's (Burma's) history over the last decades was inextricably linked to the *Tatmadaw*'s history, and the *Tatmadaw*'s history is likewise the nation's history. But the *Tatmadaw*'s different roles in national politics between 1948 and 1988 are not entirely of the *Tatmadaw*'s making.

Dissidents and anti-political parties escalated their unlawful activities, according to Burmese civil history (Callahan, 2003: 19). Civil wars are by their very nature unstable, and instability worked to the advantage of the *Tatmadaw*; the military continues to insist on the central role in Burma's politics because they see themselves as the only stable institution. In this context, disarming and demobilizing non-state armed groups is their policy for achieving peace; they themselves do not disarm, only the other guy. Nakanishi (2013: 169) calls this the winner-take-all policy assumed by the military. From the view of the Commander in Chief of the *Tatmadaw*, only after disarming and demobilization can the individuals from the EAOs choose how to comply with state policy.

Some people have the ability to start a business. Those interested in serving in the army can do so, while those interested in becoming politicians can join a political party. But it is only on the terms pre-established by the military government. These policies have been in place since the time of Ne Win. All ethnic groups must assimilate to the

majority Burmese peacebuilding agenda, with its winner-take-all strategy (Nakanishi 2013, 195–199).

It might be argued that this view which is really of forcible unification is outdated in the context of democratic values. The current military's slogan declares that no disintegration is tolerated, but this means they the military is always central as indeed, is specified in the 2008 Constitution. The problem is that since independence, the “National Union” has never existed, and was already split.

“Non-disintegration of national solidarity” is the military's slogan. But between Burmese and non-Burmese, there was no solidarity. Since the monarchical period, trust between the majority of Burmese and non-Burmese deteriorated. After all, this is why Karen leader Dr. San C. Poe (2001: 11–17) stated in the 1920s that the Karen could not cohabit with Burmese due to cultural and character differences.

National camaraderie is an illusion used to construct the country. Callahan (2003: 19) writes “Military rule never solved the problem of reforming a state with little capacity to exercise authority throughout its territory and little skill to integrate geographically dispersed minority groups that have spent centuries fighting for autonomy from central interference.

But how does the *Tatmadaw*'s respond, given a core national doctrine, which is about the eternal perpetuation of sovereignty? Thus, the ethnic groups who strive to assert political rights are seen as threats to sovereignty, according to a pro-military view. The trained military officers consider citizens asking for independence and even federalism, as potential enemies to be dealt with via the weapons of the military, which they know so well. The generals preserved this very military doctrine in the 2008 Constitution to weaken civilian politics and keep the military in politics indefinitely (Htun Zaw Htay 2017: 42–45). There are many mentions of the importance of inviolable national sovereignty in such documents, and none to the federalism that the ethnic groups and foreign donors dreamt of in the 2010s. After all, the *Tatmadaw* are first disciplined army officers wielding lethal weapons, not politicians seeking consent, consensus, and popular legitimacy.

Domination in this view entails bloodshed. In the view of the *Tatmadaw*, The military's most effective approach for eliminating threats is violence; and when the general is also a politician, the means of persuasion is also the means of violence, which he is most familiar. From this context, outward violence is necessary to politics, no one can take

the place of a general in politics. They assumed that federalism and de-centralization, which stemmed from Ne Win's xenophobia, would diminish their influence and make it impossible for them to maintain sovereignty, and lead to chaos.

These doctrines are the military's essential beliefs, which the military faction in parliament, which was guaranteed by the 2008 Constitution to be 25%.

7.2.1.2 *Democratic Alliances' Perspective on Peacebuilding*

Democratic Alliances (DA) have been fighting the military regime since 1962. The National League for Democracy, the ABSDF, the Burma Student Union, the 1988 Generation, and other Democratic Alliance groups are among them. They opposed military rule beginning with the student riots of 1962. The Democratic Alliances groups grew out of student demonstrations and participation in the anti-military government campaign. Former political prisoners, 1974 generation, 1988 generation, and 1997 generation students, exiled democratic forces, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) are allies in the democratic movement. Ethnic students and politicians are among the other Burmese students in the Democratic Alliance. After 2012, they were invited to participate in legal politics by the quasi-military government. The Democratic Alliance wanted to do this. Nonetheless, because they did not accept the 2008 Constitution, many students remained anti-military. To run the election, the majority of them made a deal with the quasi-military government.

To engage in the Thein Sein political reform, members of the NLD compromised, and agreed to operate according to the 2008 Constitution. As a result, they swept to victory in the 2015 election. They established a new government, and the priority of the NLD government was national reconciliation and peacebuilding. The NLD government endorsed the "Panglong Spirit," which had been sparked by General Aung San during the country's pre-independence years.

The goal of both Burmese and non-Burmese Democratic Alliance organizations is to end the military administration through political reform and establish a democratic country. The heightened aspirations of Democratic Alliance factions may not be fully satisfied under the 2008 Constitution. They can, however, take part in and support parliamentary reform.

Members of the Democratic Alliance are generally anti-military but also emerged from an already Burmanized society. They share a similar

view with the military concerning ethnic armed groups. Most are of a Bamar background, and were socialized in the context of the Burmanized society created by Ne Win. Some NLD members are even ex-military officers who engaged in military actions against Ethnic Armed Organizations, civilian demonstrators, and the Burmese Communist Party. Some of them expressed fear that the EAOs' approach to nation-building will result in a society that is not peaceful. Many Democratic Alliance factions see the Burmese as the majority and the leader, whereas ethnic people are the minorities and must follow where the majority Burmese lead. Many are not aware of the experiences of the highland minorities who have been subject to military attacks for decades. The few Burmese professors and sympathizers who backed the ethnic groups and highlighted their suffering, were in fact shunned by the majority Burmese, including those who are part of the Democratic Alliance.

This Democratic Alliance dreams of a democratic Myanmar which inherited the civilization of the Myanmar civilization, and language. They agree with the military that Myanmar's sovereignty is inviolable.

7.2.1.3 *Ethnic Armed Organizations' Perspective on Peacebuilding*

There are around twenty ethnic armed groups (EAOs) in Myanmar, according to the Myanmar military. Post-independence and during Ne Win's rule, these EAOs had various political agendas and ambitions. They negotiated ceasefires and peace with Burma's military governments, but viewed these efforts failed and betrayals since final peace agreements were never signed; it seemed to the EAOs that the military was never sincere (Aung Saw Oo 2018: 92). The government reached agreements with some parties, but the number of armed organizations continued to grow. The majority sought a federal state with loose central control, while others fought for political recognition as independent nations. Most insist that maintaining the independent armed militia or an important part for any peace settlement. The government always insists on disarmament, and a centralized military.

Burma's armed opposition movements did not all emerge at the same time. Some EAOs revolted in 1949, such as the Burmese Communist Party and Karen National Union, but the Kachin Independent Army and other EAOs began resisting the central government only during the 1960s. In terms of political tyranny, they evolved in various ways. Despite having varied backgrounds, political perspectives, and political ambitions,

they all want to end Burmanization and supported de-centralization, federalism, and even independence.

However, while the structure and policies of ethnic armed organizations changed over time, their political purpose has not changed. The EAOs necessarily accept the 2008 Constitution. Most EAO policies shifted away from violent opposition and toward dialogue, which is referred described as “replacing violence with polite discussion culture.” This conversation culture, according to EAO officials, is the greatest method for resolving the long-running political issues.

The Karen National Union, for example, submitted a joint proposal for political reform (Saw Hla Tun 2016: 28–31) for the 2015 NCA. NCA would bolster or enhance many of the key building blocks of peace, according to Aung Naing Oo (2016: 55), including a confidence-building tool. This strategy was meant to foster trust among EAO members, the *Tatmadaw*, and the NLD government. The plan, however, did not go as planned because shared definitions were slow to emerge.

Some EAOs tried to compromise with the government force after 2012 by signing ceasefires. These organizations claimed political recognition and legitimacy for their administration zones. The previous military government persuaded former EAOs to become Border Guard Forces (BGFs) which were independent forces which reported to the Ministry of Defense, and were nominally under their command. Some EAOs, including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the National Democratic Army-Kachin, combined to establish the Border Guard Force (BGF), which was under the Ministry of Defense’s jurisdiction (Wai Moe 2009). Quickly though it became apparent that these groups were tools of Yangon, not independent militia.

The federated states dreamed of by the EAOs. For example, in 2020, the Arakan Army announced its political claim with the Arakan Dream (Maung Maung Soe 2020: 19). This approach contradicted Ne Win’s assimilation strategy, i.e. the idea of a centralized union under army control. These organizations believed that the dialogue, culture, and transitioning into Border Guard Forces, had failed to resolve the ethnic conflict. Instead, because Ne Win’s legacy on Burmanization had both soft and hard power to diminish the ethnic political agenda, and it will solidify the Burmanization agenda for future growth.

In sum, the goals and ambitions of the EAOs are incompatible with both the military and the Burma-centric democratic forces. This difference is about the sanctity of the borders inherited from the British is at the heart of Burmanization. Related to it were very different ideas about the nature of autonomy under federalism in terms of militia, schooling, views of history, and many other subjects.

7.2.1.4 Young Civilians' Perspective on Peacebuilding

Much of the opposition to the military after the February 1, 2021, coup emerged from the young people of Myanmar, often in the cities, but also in the countryside. This opposition was coordinated via modern electronic media, which permitted people to organize quietly, quickly, and sometimes violently. Modern communications also means that the younger generations continue to be in touch with people beyond Burma's borders; it is not possible to seal the country off as tightly from information as was the case in the 1990s. A substantial diaspora communities living in Thailand, Europe, and North America also means that people inside Myanmar have global connections they did not have in the past. Such connections ultimately permit not only a flow of information, but also money and arms that fuel opposition to the military government in Nay Pyi Taw.

According to an ICRC survey, millennials are overwhelmingly opposed to the use of weapons of mass destruction in any circumstance, whether nuclear, biological, or chemical. According to Massachusetts Peace Action, peace and social justice are inextricably linked for millennials, with the former only possible through the realization of the latter. This link is beneficial to the peace movement because dreams for social change are linked to young people in Myanmar. The global village went out and linked everyone. Burma's younger generation is witnessing the country's civil war and political turmoil, but their concerns are also different from those of the older generation. Some members of the younger generation are involved in peacekeeping and political activities, and they do not necessarily subscribe to old school ideologies. They would rather live in a new society, especially in light of current global trends.

While the message from the young generation is anti-military, it is not necessarily anti-Burmanization. On social media, you can find hate speech, ethnic scorn, misinformation, disinformation, and political propaganda. The younger generation consumes such information as well. But still, the horizons are limitless; and go beyond politics, as it should. Burmese youth are avid fans of Korean K-pop stars, and even Kung Fu

Panda. They also participate in world-class virtual gaming. The infinite horizontal boundary of the internet opened their eyes to a much wider world which we hope will push back against the Burmanized heritage they have from their schools.

The younger generation does not want to live in a world where there are civil wars. They're attempting to free it from their daily lives. They seek to live in peace and stay away from politics—which they are afraid is a danger in and of itself. Still there are many who give us hope by becoming active citizens seeking to understand and participate in policy reform and development.

7.2.1.5 *The Cycle of Burmanization After 2015*

Ne Win's habitus of Burmanization is repeated. In Burma's political history, the military lost elections in 1960, 1990, 2012, 2015 and 2021. Four times, the military intervened by overthrowing democratically elected governments: In 1958, 1962, 1988, and 2021. And so, each time with a national agenda emphasizing the centrality of the militarized security state, Burmanized militarization reappeared. Democracy and federalism were seen as dangers by the military generals. Following independence, a civilian government served for ten years (1948–1958), after which a military coup occurred. The militarization obliterated the country's fledgling democracy and independence; in Burma's political arena, the battle between the military's unity and the pluralistic democratic-oriented system has escalated to the brink of eradicating each other.

The first period military rule was in 1958–1960 after the first slow military coup. Despite free general elections in 1960 which military parties inevitably lost, military rule persists. Ne Win's 1958 "Guardian Government," seemingly began this cycle which has resulted in a *habitus* which permeates society today. The second intervention was a military coup in 1962, which resulted in a fundamental change in Burma's history. The

1947 Constitution was repealed in 1962, and the military constitution, adopted in 1974.

The generals are still hesitant to relinquish political power perhaps due to the threat of war crimes trials. They decided to preserve political power until they are assured of their safety, because they too are afraid.² The gaps between the generals, democratic forces, EAOs, and youth are seemingly intractable.

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² The generals convened a “National Convention,” which began in 2004 in which seemingly everyone could propose a new constitution, though in fact the whole thing was drafted by the military. The constitution referendum was held in 2008 (Myat Thu (Takatho):(2017) 443). The military held the general election in 2010 as a result of the 2008 Constitution. Then came the establishment of the first civilian administration. The *Pyi Daung Su Kyang Khine Yey Party*, which was created by former military generals, is the name of the civilian administration (USDP). Elections in 2010 and 2015 elected a new civilian government for two terms. The Burmanization policy lost their power in election, especially in 2015 and 2021. Then, in 2021, the military generals accused of election fraud by the Nation League for Democracy Party will stage the next coup. The generals reformed the government body, which was first known as the “*Nainggan Taw Oak Chaut Yey Council*,” or State Administration Council, but was eventually renamed “Caretaker Government.”

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The Sociology of Burmanization and the Search for Peace

History, Sociology, and Burmanization

The last five chapters presented the story of Burma with Ne Win's Burmanization. The point of doing this was to tell Burma's story with Burmanization project at the center. Burmanization though was not inevitable, but took place in the context of broader social contexts, both in response to what came from within Burma, and from threats from abroad that arrived after independence.

This second section is about the sociology underlying what occurred. Sociological principles point out that while Burmanization was not inevitable, it was a response to specific conditions, and unfolded in patterns identified in Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. It happened in the context of a military which developed as an institution apart from society, what sociologist Erving Goffman called a "Total Institution" in his book *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. In the context of the wars with the British, Japan, Nationalist Chinese, Thailand, and American CIA, and numerous "armed ethnic groups," the *Tatmadaw* created its self-contained echo chamber, and has come to see itself as the only institution with the capacity to defend the boundaries inherited from the British in 1948. Within the total institution that was the, *Tatmadaw* no one questioned this assumption. Anyone questioning the central role of the military in defending Burma's integrity were traitors, or invaders. And to crush such opposition, the military used the means with which they were most familiar, that is violence. In other words, the military used arms, and insisted on

maintaining the military's monopoly over what Max Weber (2015) in his classic essay "Politics as Vocation" called the "claim to the legitimated use of physical force" in the borders inherited from the previous claimants, the lords of British Burma. Just like Burma did, to maintain this, they needed to have "others" i.e. those defined as threats and enemies.

Underlying these problems are a number of sociological processes. First there was the nature of the Burmese army as a total institution. It responded to the problems it saw in the context of ethnic relations, and an assumption that Buddhism was central to modern Burmese identity. U Nu, himself a Buddhist ascetic, sought answers within himself. General Ne Win asserted the centrality of *Barami*, and Aung San Suu Kyi talks of the power of *Metta*. These are important to point out, because they set the parameters in which future policy makers will be restrained, in the same way that the social forces preceding him, constrained what Ne Win could do, and perhaps most importantly, what he failed to do despite the grandest plans.

There is also a global contest in which Burmanization emerged. Burma emerged as a nation at a time when globally there were movements toward independence in the 1940-1960s for former British, French, American, Dutch, and Belgian colonies. Burma like other newly-independent countries, re-imagined itself as a nation-state, legitimately an equal to its former colonizer, Great Britain. The new Burmese government even I suppose presumptuously imagined itself as an equal to the hegemonic powers that were the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. In all such post-colonial countries, this meant changing the way that the people viewed themselves as both an "us" while the former colonial power and their new international neighbors became a "them." In doing this, the cultural *habitus* that is nationalism emerged. This *habitus* is the taken-for-granted values which are the logical basis on which a new nation-state stakes its legitimacy. Ne Win in recasting Burma's society as a new nation, did this through the Burmanization policies which Saw Eh Htoo emphasized were taken for granted by every school child raised in Ne Win's Burma.

The basis for the new national *habitus* embedded in school curriculum, popular culture, Burmese Buddhist practice, and of course the society was rooted in the authoritarian military discipline. It also emerged in the responses of the ethnics, who also developed narratives, school curriculum, and popular culture, emphasizing their oppression. There is in

effect, what Catherine Newbury (1989) calls the cohesiveness of oppression. Dominant and subordinate come to define themselves relative to each other, and begin a never-ending tragic dance from which it seems impossible to emerge.¹

To a certain degree this worked for the military. They had the enemy to create fear, and in the 60+ years since Ne Win's coup created a society seemingly acquiescing to the austere rigor of what Ne Win's military wrought. His apologists still point to as his achievement: the creation of a nation which is free of foreign occupation, despite the proximity of so many great powers. They emphasize that the Tatmadaw rule has prevented the recurrence of another catastrophe like World War II, or more recently the destruction that occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia between 1954 and 1990. But in exchange, they have an inward-looking country, never able to itself emerge from their civil war.

But at the same time, the austerity and oppressive rigor Ne Win wrought spawned an opposition which has with courage and guile opposed his moves by mobilizing both mass peaceful demonstrations, and violent opposition. This too is the story of Myanmar's habitual dance, and which gives birth to a peculiarly Myanmar social cohesion in response to oppression. It is a cohesion rooted in severe oppression.

Thus, Myanmar gave birth to both the violent *Tatmadaw*, and the non-violent movement of Aung San Suu Kyi. Authoritarian dictators on the one hand, with a democratic upswelling of fearless mass demonstrators on the other. There was Ne Win's promise to shoot into crowds, and never shoot high at his going-away speech in 1988. But then a few months later, Aung San Suu Kyi also published a manifesto of non-violent resistance to tyranny, "Freedom from Fear" in which she called on the people to have the courage to resist tyranny, while calling on the generals to have the courage to let power go. Tragically, the generals of course kept their promise to shoot to kill, and thousands died then, and more since. But Aung San Suu Kyi also kept her promise to keep much of the defiance non-violent, and she would do so for more than twenty years.

¹ Newbury (1989) wrote about the relationship between Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa in Rwanda and described the resulting relationship as the "cohesion of oppression." As with Burma, this type of seemingly intractable but cohesive oppression emerges out of the crucible of bureaucratic European colonialism. In the case of Myanmar, it was British, and in Rwanda it was German, and mostly Belgian. In both places, the colonial regimes instituted a bureaucratized ethnicity which rigidified relationships were peculiar to colonial administration.

The Cohesive Habitus of Oppression

Sociology describes the social structures underlying a historical phenomenon. This book is about the sociological process known as Burmanization which emerged from the policies of Ne Win's government beginning in about 1962. Ne Win never issued a document using the word Burmanization; nevertheless, it is a useful word to describe what happened after 1962, until today. I.e. the population of Myanmar was shaped by a powerful vision of *Maha Bamar*, (Great Burma) which in turn triggered the conflict, resistance, and chaos that Myanmar has experienced since. What Pierre Bourdieu described as a *habitus* emerged from the institutions of Myanmar in which the army, ethnic groups, and the monkhood were created as an "us" and "them." Within each are *habitus* of trust, loyalty, comradeship, and enmity. The central institution of this sociological process comes though from the army which is the ultimate "us" in Burma, with its monopoly over the use of violence, and indeed, its own *habitus* of applying the means of violence to forcibly Burmanize the nation.

Chapter 8 is about the consequences of the cohesive habitus of Ne Win's

Burmanization policies—the cohesion of oppression if you will. It is about the sociological processes that created the "us" and "them." Chapter 8 is about Saw Eh Htoo's view for how the limitations that Burmanization policies created for future nation-building, in a context of decades of nationalistic othering which have bounded the choices policy makers encounter Sociologist Janja Lalich (2004) has written about how "choices" are bounded in total institutions like cults. These same principles would seem to apply specifically to the Burmese military, or perhaps most militaries. But it also to the generations of Burmese habituated to Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism ethics.

Chapter 8 also includes Saw Eh Htoo's emic vision for peace in Myanmar. It is perhaps a utopian dream, but isn't that how vision works? It is by definition utopian. But there is a dissonance, too with this vision in that problem is that Eh Htoo is not the only one with this vision. In fact, I have never met a person from Myanmar/Burma who did not believe that given the nature of Myanmar's many people, such a peaceful utopia could be achieved. All believe that their cause is just, and that the people are good, decent, and righteous. The problem of course that they cannot extend that generalization to "the other," the one on who their own

stereotypes are dependent. Nevertheless, as Boulding (1999) emphasizes, such utopian dreams are necessary if there is ever to be a way beyond a seemingly intractable conflict. And indeed, history shows that even those most intractable of conflicts end. There is no longer war between France and Germany despite over 100 years of battles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Closer to Myanmar, the Indochinese wars of the twentieth century in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia ended in the 1990s. Wars can end; perhaps Saw Eh Htoo's dream utopian dream is not quite so utopian after all.

As Chapter 9 "Final Thoughts about Burmanization" describes what Tony Waters learned about Myanmar, and Burma by working with Eh Htoo and his other Burmese students.

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The Search for Peace in Myanmar

8.1 BASIC FOUNDATION FOR REALIZING PEACE IN MYANMAR

From a utopian perspective, be it micro or macro, peace is what every individual, every party, and every nation wants. However, those who endure conflict and war never realize the “peace” they dream of. But that is besides the point and is perhaps why Elise Boulding (2000: 1–2) asserted that peace is a culture, rather than simply the absence of violence. Peace is cultivated, nurtured, and developed within human society. Even Burmanization with its emphasis on militarism and authoritarianism can be socially transformed. After all, war and conflict are socially constructed, just as peace is.

Is this dream hopelessly utopian? We think it is difficult, but not impossible. After all, Germany and France are at peace within the European Union, despite wars as recently as 1945. Despite a violent separation between the United States and the British Empire which really ended following the torching of Washington by British soldiers from Canada in 1815, there is peace between the United States, Britain, and Canada. Closer to Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand now have a normal relationship despite proxy wars on the Cambodian border which ended only in the 1990s.

The people of Burma despair about reconstructing a peaceful society after seven decades of civil conflict, dozens of ceasefires, and experiments

in peacebuilding coordinated and financed by the international community between 2012 and 2021. They dream of a better society, a new chapter in history, and a new political culture. They believe that a new political culture is required in order to achieve long-term peace. The old ways should not be used to imagine a new sustainable society. It should be reborn; it should take the place of Burmese habits of thinking. The older models did not work, and must be re-thought and replaced. If it were so easy of course, they would have succeeded. But in fact, no country starts with such a blank slate; today always deals with the nightmares inherited from the past as well as the dreams of the future. Or as Boulding points out, today is really a 200-year present. Meaning the present reflects the memories of our grandparents going back 100 years, and what we do today will in turn shape what our grandchildren will think 100 years from now (see Waters 2022). This chapter includes Saw Eh Htoo's vision of what can be done today so that the dreams of our grandchildren 100 years in the future will be different.

Myanmar's geographically and culturally diverse, society cannot ignore the existing culture, be it from the military, Communist Party, the Karen, NLD, China or any of the other diverse sources. There are people who live on the Irrawaddy plains, people who live on the hills, people who came with the British, and even marginalized communities such as LGBT. They all live in Burma now. This is the reality, and it must not be overlooked. The *Tatmadaw* serves the political purpose of primarily the majority Burmese; this view resulted in stagnation and seventy years of seemingly unending conflict. Saw Eh Htoo believed that following the reasoning above, the following are the most basic preconditions for a transformational peacebuilding that will break the cycle of conflict. There must be transformative, starting with

1. *De*-Burmanization narratives.
2. *De*-Militarization programs.
3. *De*-Centralization policies.

These three peacebuilding programs need to reflect a political culture of the Burmese people which is rooted in ethnic diversity and Buddhism, and cannot be rooted in central control. Governance needs to emerge from a consortium of interests, and usher in a new era, replacing the centralized authoritarianism backed up with the violent means of the

Burmese military. It will also help Burma move toward the next step of achieving long-term peace.

Peace though is not a Bamar weight to be carried, but a national one. Peacebuilding needs to replace what the Burmese military see as their “Burmese burden,” and replace it with inclusive policies for all groups in Burma. Kipling’s poetry was that of the British Empire, and Saw Eh Htoo put this into a Burmese context when he recast Kipling’s poem to reflect Burmanization’s colonial nature. The Burmese military government adopted the phrase “coming back to the light” to describe the process of leaving the darkness of British and Japanese occupation behind. But in doing this, they must also swap peace for armaments, and the use of force for peacebuilding. In 1962 the Burmese military took the lead, i.e. took up the “burden,” and it worked no better for them, then it did for their British colonial predecessor. Ironically, even when the new National League for Democracy (NLD) government took power in 2016, it continued to use the policies of the discredited military regime—the school books remained the same, the military remained the same, and ethnic Bamar continued to dominate cultural production during the brief 2016–2021 period when the NLD held at least a modicum of power; the NLD never quite gave up the Burmese burden. And then in 2021, peaceful dreams vanished into thin air as without much thought, the military needlessly seized the burden from the NLD, convinced that national security was only possible under military command. Inclusivity was not to be, whether from the NLD, or the military.

8.1.1 *A De-Burmanization Narrative*

Ne Win’s government adopted the Burmanization narrative in 1962 in the name of unity, but it turned into a divisive narrative pitting a racialized Burmese ethnic center against the rest. In post-colonial Burma, the religious, ethnic, and ideological problems that plagued British colonial Burma rigidified, and became the fault lines that continue to plague Myanmar today. The question is how to change this narrative from one of Burmanization, to one of *de*-Burmanization?

Three essential concerns must be addressed to abolish the Burmnaizaion narrative: uncovering the root-cause of de-Burmanization, repairing losses, and restoring justice for a sustainable society. This means encouraging cultural variety and equality.

The state of independence Burma's history began in 1948 with calls to unity in the context of diversity. This was done in the context of British attempts to keep the hill areas separate from Burma proper; there was even some plausible suspicion that the British sought to keep the hill areas as a British colony (Myat Thu [Takatho] 2017: 20). However, General Aung San persuaded the ethnic leaders to work with the Burmese to free the whole country from British rule (Dr. San San Myint 2015: 81), and signing the "Panglong Agreement," in which there were promises for referenda in Shan and Karenni States any time ten years after independence.

As for General Ne Win, he saw himself as heir to the Bamar Kings, not the British Raj. Burmese kings long treated ethnic minorities as subjects, and it was this *habitus* that General Ne Win and his military supporters and historians reproduced. Burmese people made up the majority and are in charge of making decisions that affect the minority, even as the minorities armed in the highlands, and established separate governments. Those armed against the Burmese dysphemistically referred to as insurgents, destroyers, traitors, narrow-minded patriots, and foreign stooges throughout the history of contemporary Burma. The antagonism between Burmese and non-Burmese was heightened by the words chosen by the Directorate of Psychological Warfare which became The Burmese Way to Socialism.

In publications, policy papers, and the media, the Burmese government continues to use derogatory names which reflect the goals of Burmanization. These propaganda terms damaged peacebuilding efforts between Burmese and non-Burmese since the 1920s. This propaganda became the *habitus* among the majority of Burmese, and they treated others as immigrants. Policymakers claim that a real Burmese must be Buddhist. Indeed Burmese, Buddhist, and Boldness are the characteristics associated with the colors of the national flag, which are red, yellow, and green with a large white star. The result is that the "sense of unity" disappeared, replaced with assumptions of Burmese supremacy.

Justice and reconciliation are an essential step in de-Burmanization. Burma's past is littered with losses and atrocities victims. The refugee camps, IDPs, landmines, resettlement villages, rape, murder, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and ethnic armed struggles are an outcome of General Ne Win's Four Cuts strategy. This was seen as a scorched-earth policy in the war-affected zone. Forced labor, ethnic cleansing, and land grabbing are all part of what is remembered (South 2008: 32–42).

Burmanization policymakers never admitted that their policy of state-building was so destructive of the unity they claimed to uphold. The Burmese military cannot restore justice and national healing from their thrones in Naypyitaw.

De-Burmanization must begin at the highest levels of government and work its way down to the lowest levels of society, acknowledging previous atrocities and losses. But then, forgiveness will come and only when the non-Burmese communities are both recognized, and willing to assist. For long-term peace and healing, all communities must take these lessons seriously.

De-Burmanization will be opposed by former soldiers, their families, and supporters. But Burma is a multi-ethnic country with distinct ethnic identities and cultures derived from their forefathers. And not all those forefathers come from the “three great *Maha*-Bamar empires” raised to the heights by successive military governments, and the education curriculum they prepared. These forefathers mixed with people from other cultures, including people from India, China, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. Even though they have commonalities, Burma’s multi-cultural society must respect the political identity of non-Burmese; minorities cannot be asked to assimilate. Tolerance of politics and culture must be engrained in the de-Burmanized society. But this will be dependent on resolving the control of the military, and implementing programs of transformative peace education.

8.1.2 *De-Militarization Program*

The military’s position is though rigidified by decades ethnic conflict and political instability (Tin Maung Than 2019: 357) in a context where the Tatmadaw is first a military institution, and only secondly a political party wielding political authority. Military officers played a crucial role in the military operation which exacted discipline and compliance from the population in the way they know best, i.e. command and control. They assumed a political transition will require the same discipline and compliance equated with political legitimacy. Military generals use military logic and assume that the compliance and legitimacy were the same (Tin Maung Than 2019: 361). By this logic, the design of the political transition resulting in the Constitutional reforms in 1974, 1998, and 2008 which put the military at the helm of political power made sense to them. Indeed, in 1988, the Ne Win government using the same logic and

simply assigned a new Commander-in-Chief to maintain control over the country, who used the same military techniques. Thus in 1990 it ignored the results of the first election in which the NLD won. De-militarization requires decoupling the military from politics, and the administration of civilian society.

Three measures must be taken to achieve de-militarization. There must be Peace Education programs, a new liberal military, and a decentralization of state-building.

8.1.2.1 Peace Education Programs

Peace Education is the first step toward de-militarization. People who lived under military rule have never learned to live together as free and peaceful individuals. According to Elise Boulding (2000: 236), this is because a culture of war fosters a sense of dominance, fear, and a pathologic dread. Fear and dread are present in the Burmese generals who shouldered the “Burmese Burden,” and in the mountain person that general assumes to be a “half wild, half child.” The military assumes that the mountain person cannot be reasoned with. The mountain person fears every time a Burmese person comes near. How to break this cycle of fear and distrust?

Burma inherited a colonial education, which on the surface, provided a veneer of a liberal education, prior to the Ne Win rule. Oddly, schooling during the 1950s met higher standards globally, and raised the moral bar. But the military-led administration of Ne Win ruthlessly undermined liberal education, and especially the democratic values which he believed were the source of chaos created during the U Nu period in the 1950s, when the trash in Rangoon was not picked up, and streets were in poor repair.

Ne Win Burmanized education by putting blind Bamar patriotism at the heart of schooling on his Burmese Road to Socialism. That approach favored memorization and chanting at the expense of students’ critical thinking and free of expression. The elementary curriculum only educated students about Burmese heroes who were described as good because they were violent warlords and conquerors. The military was glorified, and given credit for creating the society children took for granted, domination of the ethnic peoples was defined with the euphemism “unification.” The purpose of education was to glorify a new cadre of war heroes, who Myanmar students were all habituated to admire. Today’s generation was raised on such militarized stories.

8.1.2.2 *Creating a Liberal Military*

The second pillar is to develop a liberal-minded army. The Defense Ministry should simply be one of the departments of the government under civilian administration. Soldiers are military specialists, not political leaders. Oddly, politics has rendered them ineffective as both politicians and military people, which is an important reason why Myanmar continues to be at war. Politics is a political trap for generals. Military generals may be good at using violence, but they are poor politicians. They inevitably generate opposition, and their use of violence to suppress opposition means that defiance accelerates. And defiance can, from a military perspective, be only dealt with more military violence, which in turn generates more defiance.

Myanmar needs military generals with the political will to embrace democratization (Tin Maung Than 2019: 373) and leave politics to the people and politicians. Soldiers did not dominate politics prior to the Ne Win government of 1962; it was only after that time that military officers were routinely assigned to even minor positions in ministries, of both the Union government, and those of the states and divisions. Thus the sourness of Burmanization spread widely. Political instruction turned into a half-baked plans as soldiers took control; it seemed that as soldiers, their tool was always the use violence. The result is that the political problem of disunity is reduced to counterinsurgency programs, like Four Cuts.

A professional army un-affiliated with any political party is necessary. This change must begin with fundamental military education for all ranks, from private to officer. The Commander-in-Chief must obey the Defense Minister, who is chosen by the people (Htun Zaw Htay 2017: 46). Such a foundation will offer peace, trust, and professionalism for military officers, and provide a way for Ethnic Armed Organizations to be absorbed into a truly federal army. Ethnic armed organizations will have more faith in national reconciliation and peacebuilding only if the Burmese military becomes a professional force, sheds its political responsibilities, and provides a way for the ethnic armies to be absorbed into the new apolitical army.

The formation of a civilian council to control the armed forces is the final foundation for de-militarization. The process of de-militarization will take many years. It's critical to lay this foundation because it'll help to reinforce the prior ones. Furthermore, the Burmese military must be restructured in accordance with international norms for Security Sector Reform (SSR); and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

(DDR). In the brief burst of liberalism in 2012–2021, these principles were applied only to Ethnic Armed Organizations. The principles need to be also applied to the *Tatmadaw* which with a force of 250,000–400,000 soldiers is the main threat to Myanmar, not the scattered EAOs.

SSR reforms the security system in a manner consistent with democratic norms sound principles of good governance, and DDR. There are other security-related interventions, such as anti-mine action, small arms and light weapons control and reduction, and security sector reform (SSR) (Htun Zaw Htay 2017: 39).

8.1.3 *De-Centralization of State-Building: The Problem of Burmese Kingship and Barami*

Nonetheless, Burmese monarchs from the long-dominant Bamar, have strong traditions of centralization, and used these principles to bring to heel the over a hundred ethnic groups. These principles were rooted though in fear, and not democratic consent. De-centralization is difficult because of Myanmar's militarized bureaucracy and strong centralized structure which assumes military command structure. But first de-centralization removes the military from politics.

Scott (2009: 50–63) and others describe this decentralized system of authority as a Mandala, in which the power extends from the center, and seeks to sweep in groups at the peripheries. Burmese monarchical kings oppressed and enslaved those at the edges. The British did not send out armies from the center like the kings did, but by persuading ethnic leaders to form highland micro-states, which were putatively independent, but still aligned with British administrative power. This of course is the “divide and conquer” tactic used by the British throughout its global empire (see also Waters and Panyakom 2021).

The Burmese post-colonial political system was tentatively agreed upon by ethnic leaders at Panglong. Non-Burmese came to trust tentatively U Nu's leadership, at least as the wars led to ceasefires in the 1950s,¹ and it was in this context that U Nu pushed forward with de-centralization/federalism, an attempt to form a federal state ultimately thwarted by Ne

¹ Later in the 1950s, he tried to make Buddhism the state religion, which damaged confidence between Burmese Buddhists and the substantial Christian and Muslim minorities, most of whom were from peripheral ethnic groups.

Win's 1962 coup. After 1962 Ne Win of course revived the centralized political structure inherited from the ancient Burmese kings. Ne Win reached back to the traditional values of the disciplined warrior kings equating their techniques of dominance with order, and security. Such Burmanized ethics were promoted at all levels, including education, higher education, political training schools, intensive military officer training, and religious organizations. In asserting this though, he lost control of the Mandala. All were to report directly to Rangoon, including the from the peripheries.

The personality cults rooted in *Barami* also results in a centralized government and the concentration of power. The concept of the heavenly king (Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 14; Mya Maung 1991: 26–27), and it became dogma that the country's destiny was to be ruled by the national leader (or King). Rulers had his or her own power, which came from *Barami*, which is that Buddhist type of charisma. De-centralization becomes difficult in such a context, because destiny is tied so systematically to a single person. But this is necessary if there is to be reconciliation between groups which all may have their own charismatic leader with their own powers. Aung San Suu Kyi is of the criticized by westerners for micromanagement during her brief time in power (see e.g. Maciel 2023: 310–313). But indeed while micromanagement may not be endorsed in MBA schools, it is indeed reflective of deeper Burmese values.

Buddhism and religious freedom are important in Burma, but not as conceived in Ne Win's insistence on a single form of centralized Buddhism subordinated to the state. The state and the state-religion in Burma have a close patron-client relationship as a result of decades of mutual engagement in politics by powerful military politicians, and powerful Buddhist monks (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 75). The state was declared to be the defender of Buddhism (*Sasana*), and champion of Buddhism. This exclude both Christians and Muslims, and in the case of Muslim Rohingya, the Buddhist exceptionalism became the basis for extreme persecution. Sects of Buddhist monks like the Ma Ba Tha gave the state government legitimacy to do this (see Maciel 2023: 300–301). This is though Ne Win's version of Buddhism, not that of the ascetic U Nu, or more broadly the teachings of the *Dharma*.

8.2 CREATING SUSTAINABLE PEACE FOR A FUTURE MYANMAR

A new society based on long-term peace needs to break the self-sustaining cycle of Burmanization Ne Win erected after 1962. Old habits are difficult to change abruptly, and new traditions need time to mature, just as Ne Win's policies benefited from the decades applying the policies developed in the Directorate of Psychological Warfare, including brutal and bloody Four Cuts which resulted in the habits and fears of today's Burmese societies.

The process and momentum of any de-Burmanization process will be based on Myanmar society's ability to adapt to a new *habitus*. To summarize again Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* (1977: 82), *habitus* is a product of history producing both individual and collective practices based on historical schemes. The past then survives into the present, as it emerges from structured practices emerging from principles inherited from the past.

This internal law is not simply reducible to "immediate conjunctural constraints" via simple peace workshops. What it is susceptible to is a restructuring of a school system so that generations of children will be raised to take an inclusive history for granted. What is needed is a transformation for a new *habitus*.²

What is necessary for peace and tranquility in the consequence of Bourdieu's principles? The most important factor in achieving long-term peace is behavior change, which should be based on the following factors, among which are the following. These factors can be thought of perhaps not as Roadway to Burmese Socialism, but as a roadway to peace.

1. The Will of Peace and Politics.
2. Reconstructing Peace Narratives.
3. Promoting a Culture of Nonviolence and Dialogue.
4. Investing in Peace Education.

² Mote Oo Foundation and a number of other NGOs started doing this during the brief period when control of the school systems, and schools jointly administered by the Central Government and Ethnic Armed Organizations were entertained. The Mote Oo programs developed peace programs in ethnic languages which articulated both with habits of peace, created peace narratives, and promoted dialog. My (Tony) understanding of their curriculum is that it was articulated peace education across primary and secondary schooling, and used Burmese and different ethnic languages.

5. Cultivating Diverse Values.
6. Saving both Buddhism and freedom of religion.

8.2.1 *The Will of Peace and Politics*

An obstacle to achieving long-term peace in Burma is a lack of political will across all constituencies. Ne Win attempted, but failed, to build a peaceful Burmanized Burma. In the end all Ne Win did was annihilate Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi tried as well, but was crushed by the military in both 1990 and 2021. In Burma's history, there has been a lot of peace-making and peace negotiation but a long-term peace remains elusive. In large part due to the hegemonic power of the military, and an inability to wrestle with the toxic consequences of Burmanization, and the fears it engenders.

The military's political hegemony shattered peace and political negotiations. At least ten peace talks have taken place in the last seventy years (Lintner 2020; Yan Kyaw 2017). Each negotiation got off to a good start but fell short because the military could never demonstrate a genuine commitment to peace.

Post-independence, the military played a role in politics in modern Burma, as it did in many post-colonial countries. But in Burma, not only did military men become politicians after the country gained independence, they also institutionalized rule by that institution, the military. The military defined those who disagreed as enemies to be crushed; security they asserted demands a "winner-take-all mentality." You are with us or against us. There is no in-between of federalism, or other forms of governance. Centralization, military discipline, and hierarchy became Burmanization. From the U Nu government (1948) to the Ne Win government (1962) to the current military government (2021), there was a lack of political will to compromise the intensively Burmanized view of the military state which emerged in the 1940s and the 1950s, and asserted itself after 1962. The government's narrative and terminology for rebels revealed their stance on peace and negotiations. The military vilifies insurgents as being recalcitrant stooges of foreign powers, while the rebels vilify the military for their condescension, superiority complex, and especially the cruelties of their guns, bombs, police, and prisons. When it came to the negotiating table, the government's military treated the rebel leaders unfairly, instilling mistrust, animosity, and an insistence on

surrender. Military officers pushed rebel leaders to agree to a military-oriented peace; but such peace agreements rooted in fear, stuck for only a short time, and eventually failed.

The military officers' fear of losing their position, on the other hand, triumphed over the alternatives. People who fear loss and feelings of inferiority. According to the Buddhist monk K. Sri Dhammananda (1967: 3), people tend to exaggerate their problems in such circumstances. Thus, military generals frequently invoked British colonialism to justify their power grabs. Their fears caused them to act erratically, making it difficult for rival leaders to trust them. Than Shwe, the former military dictator, moved the entire capital from Rangoon to Pynmana, a remote jungle area 250 miles north, seemingly on a whim (Ezrow and Frantz 2011). A new capital had been quietly built there, Naypyitaw. Government employees and military personnel were given only a two-day notice of the move, reflecting General Than Shwe's belief in unquestioning military discipline, and the need to obey. This was a maneuver of someone who was afraid of opposition, and assumed that opposition was duplicitous, just like the British, Japanese, Chinese Nationalists, Chinese Communists, and American CIA were in World War II and after.

Failure to take political action, according to Mujkic (2015: 12), is an example of a lack of political will. Negotiation and political dialogue are intertwined with these political and peaceful intentions. But the military officers refused to budge on the ethnic politicians' and rebel leaders' political demands. They failed to make any effective decisions or carry out the terms of the peace agreement.³ Agreements were widely distrusted, and because they were distrusted, ineffective. Distrust will continue at least as long as the military controls lethal weapons which one can be used against the population.

³ The lack of substance in the Burmese peace process was visible long-before the 2021 coup (Siegnier 2019: 48); after all the *Tatmadaw* and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) broke their 17-year ceasefire in 2011, and violence erupted across Kachin and Northern Shan states. During the period of the 2015–2021 ceasefires, there were continued violations of terms of agreement which the “peace process” only ever addressed imperfectly.

8.2.2 *Reconstructing Peace Narrative*

Stories, histories, political discourses, and religious texts all play a part in bringing stories into people's lives. On a communicative level, this is what the media and news agencies create. Molly Andrews (2007: 11) points out that narrative provides a rich foundation for exploring political identities, and how an individual or group chooses to talk about themselves is inextricably linked to how they construct their political identities. According to Eneko Sanz (2012: 3), narratives are a source of debate and conflict, as well as a means of healing. Burma's social and political narratives are entwined, for better or worse, because it is a country with over 100 ethnic groups, each of which has its own plausible story explaining its view of domination and subordination, in relation to the dominant Bamar Kings. There are peace narratives hidden in such accounts, but peace narratives they do not circulate as widely as conflict narratives.

When creating narratives, story-tellers choose the words, terminology, definitions, motivations, and imagery for their target groups. They demonize the opponent they fear, and burnish their own position. Those narratives were used to justify killing, and were legitimated over the course long civil wars, and spread with the mid-century slogans spread the Psychological War Directorate, and its successors in Ne Win's Ministry of Education. The phrases described opposing forces, and ethnic rebels as naïve and childish. Current military leaders, habituated to the accounts they first heard in Ne Win's schools still habitually reproduce Ne Win's story about their foes. Those who listen to the state military's political channels hear the same find terminology, terms, and definitions their parents and grandparents heard. The usage, words, and definitions reflect the mentality and politics inherited from the Directorate of Psychological Warfare of the 1950s.

As described in Chapter 1, Francis Fukuyama (2018: 18–23) uses three concepts: *thymos*, *isothymia*, and *megalothymia* which refer to the nature of identity in places like Myanmar where there is persistent inequality in power. *Thymos* is about the spiritedness of identity, *isothymia* is about the modern demand by formerly oppressed people to be recognized for what they are, and *megalothymia* is the form which demands that one identity be superior over another. Or as Fukuyama put it, when *isothymia* seeks equality *megalothymia* seeks recognition as superior, while *thymos* seeks recognition.

The army generals who inherited Ne Win's legacy in Burma after 1962, consistently positioned themselves as superior to all others, heirs to a sacred *Barami*, and insist that the ethnic groups recognize this inherent superiority, a reward of *Barami* and accumulated merit. The generals believed that being superior meant all decisions they made were to be deferred to, and in a manner they were accustomed to in the military. They cultivate megalothymia as a result.

8.2.3 *Peace Education, a Culture of Nonviolence, and Dialogue*

Every government in Burma failed to promote nonviolence and dialogue. Instead, they used violence to control the people. People's minds were imprinted with the word "FEAR," after seventy years of civil resulted in refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), disabilities, and the loss of many lives. Violence flourished as a result of these horrors and violence. Nonviolence and a respectful "conversation culture" is required to develop a peaceful society.

8.2.3.1 *What Is Transformative?*

But nonviolence and dialogue culture are not always the same as the negotiations Western peacebuilders bring to Myanmar. The terms "non-violence" and "dialogue" have different definitions. The term "non-violence," refers to the use of peaceful means rather than force to achieve political or social change. This is more than simply a decline in reported violent incidents such as those reported in the press, or via foreign embassies. A "dialogue" is a conversation between two or more people (or groups), especially one aimed at exploring a particular subject or resolving an issue. "Dialogue" is often used colloquially to refer to any kind of conversation, sometimes even interchangeably with the terms "discussion" or "debate and is frequently linked with mediation." Left out is the fact that dialog is two-way communication and is not simply the presentation of demands followed by acquiescence. Too much of the "dialog" between the military government and its opponents lack two-way communication. For that matter, two-way communication was lacking between the British and the colonized, a problem that continues to be found between the foreign donor community, and the Myanmar people hired to carry their policy prescriptions. Two-way dialog is what must be fostered in Burmese politics for the country to peacefully address

its political issues. But nonviolence and dialogue, take time to cultivate. Sebastian Kratzer (2019: 63), a dialogue expert, stated,

Resolving violent conflict and establishing peace is a difficult and time-consuming process. It's a gradual transition from peacekeeping to peacebuilding. Peacemaking, in early conflict resolution models, refers to efforts to stop fighting, end violence, and reach a peace agreement. Peacebuilding, on the other hand, is viewed as a long-term process aimed at gradually altering the structures, relationships, attitudes, and behaviors that fuel conflict.

Ramirez (2007: 3–15) in describing dialog, described six steps, little of which is ever seen in a Burmanized classroom.

1. It's best not to bring up past wrongdoings, as this could lead to future retaliation.
2. Respect other people's viewpoints and be willing to disagree.
3. Tolerance and comprehension.
4. Having a better understanding of other cultures and civilizations.
5. Keeping other cultures from being abused in the past.
6. Positivity toward genuine reconciliation.

Ramirez's standards can be used to judge whether the Burmese peace talks are fair and effective. The emphasis of Western INGOs on disembodied "peacebuilding" without reference to such a process is why cease-fires never lasted more than a decade or so, with some "compromises" lasting only a few months.

Ramirez's dialogue steps can also be compared to Ne Win's progress in peace talks with ethnic groups. None of Rodriguez preliminary dialogue steps' were met by Ne Win, nor his negotiators. Instead, he rooted everything in what as Weber (2015: 136) put it, the monopoly over the use of force, legitimated or not. Given the international Westphalian system of mutual recognition of sovereignty, Four Cuts operations, and other violence was accepted by the international community. After all, it was reasoned, the government dominated by Ne Win's army held the reins of power, which is what was recognized at the United Nations, irrespective of ideas about the nature of popular legitimacy, and electoral defeats of the military parties in 1960, 1990, 2012, 2015, and 2020. The fact that the defeated military controlled the guns and the capital is enough for

international bodies. Ne Win used the monologue created by the Directorate of Psychological Warfare assertions to project 'to foreigners and locals that legitimacy was there, even when it was not. In this context, the *Tatmadaw* resumed his massive military operation after every failed "peace talk," claiming that the Ethnic Armed Organizations were at fault. Civil wars became worse, and new ethnic armed groups sprang up.

Since 1962, the violent culture spread like a plague, and it is seemingly unstoppable. But what is now apparent is that the slow cultivation of a culture of nonviolence and dialogue that puts Burmanization in the rear-view mirror is the only way to achieve long-term peace in Burma. There were only three rebel groups at the start of the civil war in 1948: the BCP, the KNU, and the MNSP. In today's world, the violent culture has spawned over 25 armed groups on the periphery; militarism is also still alive and well.⁴

Socialization in modern society is based on mass education, as Ne Win's government realized when Burmanization was put at the center of their policies. Socialization is defined in a sociology text as "the process by which we become members of society, both by internalizing society's rules and values and by learning to perform tasks as a worker, friend, citizen, and so on." (see Clausen 1993: 67). From this context, national planning needs to include peace education in order to educate and transform Bamar and ethnics to engage in peaceful collaboration and political dialog, in order to build a society in which differences are resolved peacefully, and dignity for all is assumed.

But what happened after 1962, is that military training and mass schooling captured people's imagination. State television broadcast propaganda films depicted the government army defeating ethnic armed groups. Students at the school like Saw Eh Htoo learned about the history of the conflict between noble Burmese and uncivilized ethnic rebels. In these films, ancient benevolent Burmese rulers were successful in subordinating the childish ethnic rulers as clients, and the subordinated hill peoples happily paid tribute in a feudal system. Children were influenced and socialized to be familiar with a violent culture as a result of these

⁴ Second-track diplomacy which emphasizes dialog between actors below the level of international diplomacy is according to Lederach (2005), the best way to establish a nonviolent dialogue culture. As part of the democratization and state-building process, a culture of nonviolence and dialogue must be promoted through the media, education, in-school textbooks, and cross-regional initiatives.

military and fear driven winner-take-all myths. In the name of unification, it was taken for granted that Burmese rulers ruled the kingdom and had the authority to rule over ethnic groups.

Neither the state administration nor the military changed their military-oriented policies so far. This *habitus* of thinking is ingrained in Myanmar. Ordinary people became pro-military, and believe violence is needed to solve political problems. Many tycoons, who have ties to those who keep weapons, both military and ethnic armed groups, encourage this view as part of their business model. And the rule of law is weak because the court is controlled by the generals who are considered biased and illegitimate. People are incapable of dealing with one another. The crime rate increased.

8.2.3.2 *What Is Peace Education?*

What is peace education? Peace education takes place at all levels, including micro, meso, and macro. According to Boulding (2000: 261), “there began to be a new awareness by families of the schools and what children needed to learn what was not taught in the ordinary school curriculum.” Peace education and training programs begin in schools but included much of the local community. What is more peace education is about *transforming* older habits of conflict, with new habits of dialog, mutual respect, and compromise. Even though developing peace education seems simple, reaping its benefits takes time. Japan, for example, has taken its time rebuilding its country since World War II. Japan’s new peace tradition was built on previous mistakes and missteps.

In Burma, the word “peace” is usually associated with religious traditions, especially Buddhism which focuses on the development of “inner peace” in a fashion that puts peace at the individual level, in peaceful relations between people. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam also have similar assumptions about the nature and value of peace.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 72) write that, a *habitus* or disposition is a structured structure that is inclined to serve as a structuring structure. And just as a society can be structured to cultivate a poisonous nationalism, so can a curriculum be structured to focus on the cultivation of the values of peace. Citizens can learn about peace from a variety of sources, including online programs, workshops, practitioner interviews, the discourse of peace educators, and the speeches of well-known people. But, a peace-focused government must establish a separate policy for peace education and devote time, money, human resources,

and technological resources for establishing a lasting peace that intentionally transforms civil war into a new *habitus* of mutual cooperation and respect.

8.2.4 *Cultivating Diverse Values*

Burma is wedged between China and India, with Thailand and Laos in the east and southeast, and Bangladesh in the southwest. The ethnic population along the border areas. Furthermore, ethnic communities in Burma have a wide range of cultural diversity in terms of languages, geographical location, livelihood, political affiliation, and cultural background. Multiculturalism embraces democratic ideals such as equity, equality, freedom, social justice, and human dignity (Moawad and Shoura 2017: 803). The paradigm for the world shifted from a monocultural to a multicultural society. Military commanders in Burma, on the other hand, continue to embrace a Burmanized monoculture as a way to maintain in order to maintain consistent control over what they assume is a national race (Cheesman 2017).

To restore the peace and harmony that the Ne Win dictatorship shattered, a new political culture that accepts diversity is needed. By removing the worst and replacing them with the best, peace and harmony can be achieved. The role of society, following Emile Durkheim's approach, is comparable to that of the human body. Each component is necessary, and each component is vital. Without all parts, the body, like society, cannot function. The tradition of Ne Win must be replaced with one that emphasizes unity and diversity at the same time. But how to create a multicultural society?

1. Accepting people of various ethnicities and racial identities is the first category for developing cultural diversity ideals. Ethnic minorities and immigrants were pushed to the margins of Myanmar society by structural and cultural violence. Ethnic categorization for the purposes of political discrimination must be abolished, and full citizenship should be implemented for immigrants and especially the descendants of immigrants. Everyone is reliant on one another. The ethnic minority's faith in the majority needs to be cultivated.
2. The second step is to develop multicultural historical narratives. Ne Win aspired to write a history of a united Burma that was "one race," *Taingyintha* Ne Win's historical narrative though did

not reflect the population today or even at independence. Narratives reinforced discrimination against certain ethnicities, by labeling cultures as uncivilized. The military judged the people based on their own Bamar culture and values, explicitly assuming Bamar to be superior to other cultures. Ne Win's historian asserted a single story to represent everyone who lived in independent Burma territory, even if it did not reflect the memories of Kachin, Karen, Shan, Rakhine, and many others. Even historical groups, such as Muslims and Christians, who served as citizens and leaders were omitted. Future historians need to create a narrative that includes all of Burma's people.

3. The third step is to promote interfaith acceptance and tolerance. Burmese people have lost their religious tolerance in post-colonial Burma. For political purposes, the state used all religions. Some religious leaders follow the orders of generals and carried out their policies, regardless of whether religious teachings were followed or not. The presence of evil transforms into *Dharma's* stillness (Truth). In this case, the state must implement crosscultural and interfaith initiatives in order to strengthen relationships and understanding. To foster trust and peaceful cohabitation, every religious organization should promote religious tolerance.
4. Respect for human rights, gender equality, and freedom of expression is the fourth phase. Human rights issues are numerous and difficult to discuss, but they must be confronted. Myanmar should respect children's rights, women's rights, and rights that promote human dignity, even if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not apply to it. There is no such thing as human dignity under a military administration. Generals with the military *habitus* too often abuse their positions of power for personal gain.

The generals eroded public understanding of human rights by routinely violating them. The generals promoted a machismo ethic of militarism that sustained the idea that the army was at the only institution capable of protecting the nation. Women's roles were reduced to those of support for the men as sexual partners, and the bearers of children. Male dominance thrives in the context of militarism and dictatorship which cannot thrive with gender equality. The gender equality movement includes gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual woman, and children's rights. Human rights and dignity are predicated on political and religious freedom of expression. It is

critical to encourage the ability to disagree and the right to defend one's religious beliefs. The recognition of such diversity is the seed of lasting peace.

5. Burma's civil war and communal violence created stateless communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees on the outskirts of the country where the state had little legitimacy. The number of stateless people rose as a result of military activities and state-sponsored violence.

As James C. Scott (2009) described, stateless people have existed on the periphery of Burma's societies for generations. As the civil war and human rights deteriorated in Burma, ethnic population increasingly depended on Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps because they were unable to go to their ancestors' homelands. Today, following decades of displacement, too many IDPs are effectively stateless, and no longer can seek out their original location homelands, which have since been occupied by others, creating claims and counter-claims which will bedevil even a peaceful Burma's future.

Burma's culture is homogeneous, militaristic, and patriarchal today. These ideals are deeply ingrained. Respect for others, adherence to basic human rights, consideration for stateless people who have lived in Burma for many decades, and support for a new paradigm will all help to improve the country. A progressive mindset must replace the fixed mindset in order to provide hope, a future, and ultimately a more peaceful and just society.

8.3 SAVING BUDDHISM AND PROMOTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Renunciation of worldly attachment is very important to Buddhists. Buddhism teaches about the problem of suffering, craving, and how to break the cycle of rebirth by following Buddha's methods. If Burma is to be Buddhist, the practice of Buddhism which focuses on peace, cooperation, and renunciation, must not be conflated with ethno-centrism, and militarism. Ironically, the military generals claim to be devout Buddhists and direct government funds to build great *Stupas*, and other sites of worship in Naypyitaw and elsewhere. But their beliefs were not reflected in politics. It is critical to convert politicized Buddhism to pure Buddhism.

When the essence of Buddhism flourishes, so will religious freedom. Burma has over 80% Buddhists, thousands of monks, Buddhist temples, and pagodas. But as political analyst Maung Tha Ma Nya (2019: 88) points out, justice has not prevailed; injustices abound, and evildoers are above the law. In such a context renunciation of secular governance becomes critical.

Ironically, former Prime Minister U Nu proposed Buddhism as a state religion in the early 1960s, which sparked a strong debate because of what it taught monks, and laypeople, and what it meant for leadership about renunciation, self-awareness, and inner peace. Ne Win's Burmanization project though began quite differently. He had little interest in personal renunciation, and sought to use Buddhism for psychological warfare, and as a counter to the political threats Burma's foreign enemies brought, rather than as a peaceful practice of the Buddha's teachings.

The majority of Burma's population is Buddhist, and will remain so. This is a good thing. But Burmese Buddhism must be reformed if Myanmar is to become a peaceful nation. Buddhism teaches morality to monks, laypeople, and rulers alike. Under Ne Win's Burmanization program, though, the teachings of the Buddha for leaders have been somehow omitted; monks do not typically mention moral teaching for the monarch in their sermons in the post-1962 world. Only the disciplined obedience of the laypeople is highlighted in sermons, which, served the interest of the ruling *Tatmadaw*.

During the monarchical era, the monks corrected the kings if they did not follow the Buddha's teachings, and they directed the King toward the proper path to peace and justice. But after 1962, the military generals took control of religious institutions and used them to advance their political agenda. Some monks became stooges of military generals, supporting militarism in various ways and perverting Buddhism in the process. These problems began with Ne Win's plan to limit monks' political participation.

The example of Asoka, the third-century king from India, is instructive. Maung Tha Ma Nya (2019) wrote that religious propagation could not be achieved through threats, violence, or force. Genuine Buddhism has the capacity to coexist with people of other faiths. The blossoming of Buddhism will benefit the Buddhist community, while also gaining acceptance among the interfaith community. It is necessary to return to the Buddha's teachings in Burma to achieve peace. And it needs to be clear that the *Sangha* (monkhood) will not meet Buddha's standards as long

as it serves the dictatorship. To save the country, the *Sangha* must stand with the people and denounce the dictatorship. By doing so they will save Buddhism.

8.4 CONCLUSION

A peaceable Myanmar is a long-term goal for all. But this is inconsistent with the Burmanization which undermines the needed spirit of cooperation, accommodation, and even Buddhist renunciation. This is at the core of the problem. De-Burmanization, De-Militarization, and De-centralization are the first steps to bring about such change.

For academics, politicians, policymakers, international specialists, funders, and activists, the ultimate goal is to presumably bring peace to Burma which stopping the fighting. However, it is difficult to address the root-cause of the conflict and find a solution until one understands the nature of Burmanization. Following the 2010 political reforms, academics and scholars began to propose strategies for Burma to achieve peace. The NCA and peace process were effectively launched as a result of their efforts, but they also did not last a decade, because they did not address the core sources of Ne Win's Burmanization.

Ne Win and his supporters—historians, policymakers, and legislators—developed Burmanization narratives that encompassed everyone who was eligible to be a member of the national ethnic groupings. The Burmanization “three empires” story initiated by colonial officers G. S. Luce and Furnival and their academic associates, is perpetuated by the new Burmese educated elite. Ne Win's historians publicized the history of Burmese supremacy, beginning with King Anawrahta, King Bayinnaung, and King Alaungpaya, who ruled the kingdom since the eleventh century. In their telling, the non-Burmese became the subject of the kings as a result of these three kings in Burma's history, and the kingdoms were unified. That history was re-written by Ne Win under the name of “Unification.” Unification for Ne Win then, was the idea that since the eleventh century, every Burmese ruler unified Burma using the power of the military; so why wouldn't this story continue with the newly reconstituted Royal Army? That story is featured in school textbooks, popular culture, and the habitus of the Bamar masses. The Ne Win Burmanization myth grew at an exponential rate during the BSPP and military dictatorships and is embedded in the population today. It must be rooted out.

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Final Thoughts About Burmanization

9.1 EH HTOO'S BACKGROUND AND DISSERTATION WORK

This book began in about 2018 as Saw Eh Htoo's dissertation topic. He was convinced that the original sin in Myanmar was Ne Win's militarized Burmanization programs which he believed poisoned any attempts at creating a new Myanmar. These programs began following the coup of 1962. Eh Htoo kept emphasizing to me that belief in the Greater Burma (*Maha Bamar*) was so deep that no simple training program or peace curriculum, would change the hearts of the masses of the Burmese people living in vast rural populations.

Eh Htoo also believed that this Burmese prejudice was new, something specifically cultivated as a matter of policy by General Ne Win's military government after 1962. He was actually quite a fan of the U Nu regime (1948–1962) that preceded Ne Win, believing that there was a 14 year window when the Burmese nation was starting to come together as a multi-ethnic society, and it would have done so, if the U Nu, the Buddhist ascetic, was not overthrown.

The dissertation that Saw Eh Htoo left me in March 2022 was truly an emic document, reflecting his insider view of Myanmar's politics and society. He took much for granted in his understanding of Myanmar's cultures, politics, history, and sociology. In developing this what Saw Eh

Htoo left for an international audience I have tried to adapt it to an international audience. A number of views that are counter-intuitive to the received Western knowledge about Myanmar and peace are important. Some of these views are listed below.

Much of Saw Eh Htoo's conclusions are based on his extensive reading in the Burmese language literature, some of which is cited in this book. Saw Eh Htoo's, like others in the educated part of Myanmar society, read (and write) voraciously in Burmese. During recent years, too, a number of the architects of Ne Win's Burmanization policy have explained themselves, and the memories of how, when, and why policies were adopted that much of the Western world finds confusing and cruel. While Saw Eh Htoo disagreed with these policies, I am really glad that he included them in his dissertation work. The views of the men who implemented Ne Win's policy directives are important if the world is to come to grips with the consequences of the cruel Four Cuts policies implemented by the *Tatmadaw* since the 1960s, and continuing today.

9.2 GOOD POINTS THAT EH HTOO AND OTHERS CONVINCED ME TO CONTINUE ASKING ABOUT

1. *Buddhist political societies are not Greek demos, Israeli tribes, or Canadian federalism.*

Myanmar has a capacity for self-rule by the people, just like other countries. Perhaps indeed, it even has a greater capacity for democracy than other countries, as the massive demonstrations and boycotts during British rule in the 1930s and 1940s, and against military rule have more recently shown repeatedly in Burma's history.

But the quest for political order in Myanmar looks toward the center, it does not look to federal arrangements, delegated powers, or decentralized Greek City-States. Nor is Myanmar an alternative form of the Canadian, Swiss, or German federalism that donors promote. Rather it looks reflexively for a ruler who has special capacity (*Barami*) to organize people, and deftly force consensus when necessary. Such people of course exist in Myanmar—Aung San and his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi immediately come to mind. But so do others, like the charismatic Karen leaders Saw Baw U Gyi, and Dr. San C. Poe. Shan, Kachin, Mon, and others have such leaders as well.

A number of military generals have sought to achieve this type of power-to-command, including General Ne Win, drug lords who emerged in after the 1950s, and any number of other political figures among the “tribals” who have flashed onto the scene quickly, but then after a decade or two disappear. Olive Yang, Khun Sa, and Lo Hsing Han in the north meet this criteria; for that matter the twins Johnny and Luther Htoo who led an armed rebellion in the late 1990s when they were ten years old do too. The question is how can this charismatic energy, *barami*, be marshaled for constructive state-building? Importing a federalism formula from Switzerland, Canada, or even India is not going to be a good substitute for something developed in Myanmar.

2. Schooling is important, but liberal transformative education is more important.

Burmanization emerged so forcefully because it was introduced via state schools, where generations of students were indoctrinated in the ways of the military state. This was done in an isolated country, where the military could control information from outside using techniques first developed by the military officers from the Psychological Warfare Directorate. The educational goal was to create individuals who are emotionally bound to serve the all-knowing king, general, or government.

Authoritarian schools everywhere indoctrinate—patriotic education is really not that hard or unusual. Pledges of allegiance, chants, songs, film, and much else are used around the world to develop a patriotic sense that the “us” is greater than all the alternatives. Harder, is to develop an idea of a shared consciousness, in which there is an assumption that there is an “us” that will rule as justly and fairly as possible, while also respect the rights of “them” to do the same. But, the latter requires a certain type of transformative education in which the student comes to see themselves as both an individual with agency, but also as a member of a larger national community *at the same time*. This is what is at the heart of what is called transformative education. Notably, this is different than creating a loyal soldier or member of a militarized society, which is what Ne Win did in the Burmanized schools of Myanmar’s Ministry of Education.

I learned from Eh Htoo, and particularly his classmate Qamaruzzaman A., a Singaporean, that transformative education is key—because that is the only type of education which asks people to think differently. They

come to think of themselves as being not only a product and servant of the state, but as creators of a society which continually transforms itself, and its citizens. This is fundamentally different than the collection of facts, knowledge, and skills, i.e. what is typically taught in schools whether in a language, mathematics, or social science class. It is certainly different than lessons in patriotism, and narrative histories designed to justify existing power structures, such which is what happened in Ne Win's Burma, and in many other countries. Transformative education transforms not just the individual, but how they relate with each other and recreate society together. Transformative education requires systematic techniques and approaches to how education is organized and perceived.

3. *Benedict Anderson's book Imagined Communities, and Max Weber's ideas about Gemeinschaft are intuitively appealing in Myanmar, even if others consider them "old fashioned."*

Myanmar students are very responsive to Benedict Anderson's ideas of imagined communities and nationalism, Max Weber's ideas of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* community as expressed in his essay "Classes Status (*Stände*), Parties." Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus* are also very relevant. More quickly than my American students they come to see the paradoxes inherent to these concepts. Myanmar students habitually understood that society (*Gemeinschaft*) is far more than the sum of the economic wants of the anonymous marketplace. They knew that leaders manage populations by creating habits of honor, privilege, and identity to both benefit and manipulate people. This is what Anderson, Weber, and Bourdieu write about. Notably, such concepts are typically left out of consultancy reports written by political scientists, economists, MBAs, public health professionals, engineers, etc.

All of my Myanmar and Karen students were also attracted to the idea of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Nation-building is close to their hearts. For the Myanmar students, they were well-aware that the military government manipulated patriotic emotions to seek support, while also, like Saw Eh Htoo, appreciating the deep horizontal kinship of national identity. As for my other Karen students who, unlike Saw Eh Htoo, sought to establish their own nation of Kawthoolei, they found Anderson's ideas about imagined communities attractive because of their own unrealized dreams of national comradeship. This is the case for the

Karen of the Thai-Burma border regions who dreamt of having their own national state, Kawthoolei, recognized by the world community. I have met Shan, and others who quietly harbor similar ambitions.

1. *Buddhism is important for understanding the logic of Myanmar society.*

Barami and *Metta* are emphasized in this book, but in fact there is much more to Buddhist political thought, and Saw Eh Htoo is not the only one reaching this conclusion. Researchers published dissertations and articles in recent years which reflect the importance of Buddhist ethics in understanding ethnicity, governance, charity, and other features of Burmese society. A good portion of this comes through in recent biographies of Aung San Suu Kyi, who is not the focus of this dissertation. Having finished this book manuscript though, I fear that the important role that these ideas should play in policy making about Myanmar (and Southeast Asia more generally) in the future. Mon Mon Myat (2023) who was Saw Eh Htoo's fellow PhD student, recently completed her dissertation "The Religious, Moral, and Spiritual Foundations of Aung San Suu Kyi's Political Thought." in April 2023 at Payap University, Chiangmai highlights this well,

I hope Dr. Mon Mon's dissertation will be published as a book soon.

Mikhail Lubina (2019/2020) is also part of this movement of asking about how Buddhist thought underpins political power, and has published recently two books about Myanmar politics which emphasize the Buddhist roots of modern Myanmar politics, *The moral democracy: the political thought of Aung San Suu Kyi*, and *A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Hybrid Politician*. Matthew Walton has written much more specifically about Burmese Buddhist thought in his book *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought in Myanmar*, and his earlier PhD dissertation. Hans-Bernd Zöllner and Rodion Ebbighausen wrote about it in their 2018 book *The Daughter*. Hans-Bernd Zöllner has also written books in English and German about the role of Buddhism in Burmese politics, and is currently writing a book about Buddhism in the context of U Nu, which I hope will be published soon (see Zöllner 2022).

9.3 WESTERNERS ARE NOT VERY GOOD AT SEEING POWER OUTSIDE MYANMAR'S STATE, BUT PHD STUDENTS FROM MYANMAR DO

All of my Myanmar students have had negative experiences with the Myanmar military and police, and they fear both. Those, like Saw Eh Htoo who lived in Yangon in the 1990s and 2000s, remember the threat of midnight arrest, beatings, and disappearances. They all talked of how they became quiet and reserved in a world where all believed a careless word would lead to arrest. The circle of people they trusted shrank, and their knowledge of both local and international news was restricted. All, they remember, was focused on the demand to conform to what the military government called the “disciplined state.” In that context they became convinced, too, that Myanmar’s independence was threatened from outside, and inside.

Westerners working in Myanmar seem to jump to a conclusion that a *habitus* of silence is one of acquiescence. This was never the case, though. After all, millions of Myanmar people have repeatedly challenged government authority. Massive peaceful “People Power” marches are long a part of Myanmar politics. For that matter the support that the violent PDFs and Ethnic Armed Organizations receive often reflect an interest in democracy, and especially an opposition to military domination. This is not acquiescence.

There are also a tradition of fair elections in Myanmar. The problem is not the election, but the fact that after losing the elections, the military parties in Burma/Myanmar, inevitably stages a military coup which in turn is recognized by the international community.

9.4 SOLDIERS MAKE TERRIBLE POLITICIANS

Parliamentary systems assume that diverse voice and consensus agreements are sought through negotiation, voting, persuasion, and nonviolent methods between diverse party interests. Such systems tolerate dissent, and minority views. Militaries do not work that way though. Ne Win and his officers were military men, seeking command and obedience, and were created that way as young boys via rigorous basic military training, and years of lethal fighting in the highlands. It is further accentuated by habits of isolation on military bases and housing as they grow older. They

are trained to kill on command, and in ways that violate the most important norms of civilian society. Soldiers are convinced of the importance of military omnipotence, and the dangers of civilians who can betray them.

I was convinced by Saw Eh Htoo that people trained and conditioned to handle the means of violent coercion, i.e. the military and often the police, make terrible politicians. They give the illusion of efficiency and discipline. But efficiency and discipline are not what politics are about: consensus and legitimacy are. The Burmese military lost every free election it sponsored.¹

The *Tatmadaw* are first and foremost disciplined army officers wielding lethal weapons, not politicians seeking consent, consensus, and popular legitimacy. They are not politicians seeking to forge coalitions that include one-time “enemies,” despite internal contradictions, and the legitimated approval of vast civilian populations that is “consent of the governed.” What this means is that peace requires demobilization of the *Tatmadaw*. Such demobilization will play into the greatest fears of the Burmanized majority of the country that this will be an opening for the Chinese and United States to re-enter, and control the country for their own geo-strategic purposes. The United States and China should do everything to ensure that this is not the case—but unfortunately, so far as I can tell, neither country has the capacity to step back, and permit normal projects of democratic politics to play themselves out in Myanmar. Instead, as in the past, they continue to use Myanmar as a playground for their larger hegemonic interests, just as the Japanese and Allied powers did in World War II.

The *Tatmadaw* are the first disciplined army officers wielding lethal weapons, not politicians seeking consent, consensus, and popular legitimacy. They are not politicians seeking to forge coalitions that include one-time “enemies,” despite internal contradictions, and the legitimated approval of vast civilian populations that is “consent of the governed.”

As the *Tatmadaw* found out in every free election it contested, it is not enough to pick up the garbage on time and disappear beat up petty criminals, silence dissent, and insist on a “disciplined population,” to gain the legitimacy of the ballot box. Politicians though, know how to do this, which is why the NLD was so successful at the ballot box in

¹ Generals in neighboring Thailand tend to lose elections the call too because they, too, are not as popular with the voting public as civilian parties. As in Myanmar, Thai generals still often end up in key political positions after elections their parties lose.

1990, 2012, 2015, and 2020 even though Aung San Suu Kyi the NLD government never able to implement a successful efficient government in the brief time they held power. But in their failures, the NLD were not perceived as arrogant, or people to be feared. This is because, despite their short-comings, they are politicians tuned into the underlying values of the broader populations in ways that soldiers never were (see Myat 2019).

9.5 A FEW FINAL NOTES ABOUT WHAT I FIND INTERESTING

As mentioned above, the PhD student Qamaruzzaman A. introduced me to the ideas of transformative education and explained well why it is different than the traditional education found not only in Myanmar schools, but also in American schools I attended. Even in my own classrooms I often focused on whether students “get the material,” rather than whether there is a transformation in their world view as a result of what I teach.

In his dissertation, Saw Eh Htoo took this a step further by saying specifically why this is important for peace education in a place like Myanmar where the military government emphasized creating the patriotic disciplined Burmanized Buddhist, rather than a citizen capable of self-governing in cooperation with millions of others. Creating such a citizen is in fact difficult because Burmanization with its cultivated fear of betrayal by the foreign other, and by fellow citizens is at the heart of the problem. Aung San Suu Kyi in 1990, in her first major piece of writing after the 8.8.88 demonstrations wrote “Freedom from Fear” which is about the corrosive power of that emotion. Fear needs to be transformed, and this does not happen through one workshop from a curriculum brought from abroad. Before the coup, some NGOs like the Mote Oo Foundation were spending a great deal of time in curriculum development for Burmese, and ethnic schools. The curriculum developed was focused on transforming what it means to be a Burmese citizen, and spread itself across 12-year long curriculum. But creating such a new generation takes time—by definition it takes a generation, i.e. 20–25 years.

Finally, working with Eh Htoo and my Burmese students has convinced me that religion has an important role in how political reform occurs. I was surprised that in the dissertation he gave me in 2022, Saw Eh Htoo rather bluntly asserted that Buddhism is important to Burma, and the principles of Buddhism need to underlie plans for peace there.

He wrote this despite the fact that he himself is a theologically trained Baptist Christian. The lengthy attention he paid to Buddhism in this book is an argument for first how institutional Buddhism was manipulated and misused by Ne Win beginning in the 1960s, but secondly also points out how Buddhist concepts infuse Myanmar's *habitus* for thinking about leadership, politics, citizenship, and democracy.

9.6 WHAT EH HTOO AND MY OTHERS PHD STUDENTS DISCOVERED GOES BEYOND MYANMAR

I worked in Chiangmai Thailand from 2016 to 2022 with a number of students from Myanmar, as well as other countries. While doing this I learned much about how they think about peace, and politics in Myanmar. More importantly I learned about my own Western definitions of peace, which had much to do with the absence of war, rather than the peace that comes from within the individual, and emerges as a positive peace from a particular society. Psychology and self-control are at the heart of Buddhist practice, in ways that it is not necessarily in other religions. Ne Win's documents consistently point to psychological conditions being at the heart of their version of "disciplined" government. The generals were in tune with Burmese concepts of the state and governance, the problem emerged when they used the tool of the soldier—violence—to achieve these political goals. Eh Htoo, a Karen Christian told me many times that it is the "mind set" of the soldiers which is a barrier to peace—i.e. the psychology, and inner self.

I do think that this principle goes beyond Myanmar, and Buddhism with its interest in things like *Barami* and *Metta*. Much of governance in the West is rooted in a *habitus* of Judaeo-Christian ideas articulated in the Bible, and other Scriptures. Out of this has come both the modern democracy found around the world, as well as the concern for individual human rights. But having said this, the seeds of fascism, and totalitarianism are also found in Judaeo-Christian traditions, despite their roots in the laws of Noah, Moses, and Jesus.

Sometimes sociologists use the word palimpsest to describe the *habitus* underlying a phenomenon like Burmanization. These are the unspoken taken for granted which underlie the great sociological mystery of why people obey (and disobey) the leaders who shape society. I hope that future social scientists will explore this mystery as well—and use Saw Eh Htoo's observations from Myanmar to do so.

Tony Waters,
May 1, 2024, Lüneburg, Germany

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